

# ENA'S SHINING EYES: REVISITING VAMPIRISM IN *NADA* BY CARMEN LAFORET

## *LOS OJOS BRILLANTES DE ENA: RECONSIDERANDO VAMPIRISMO EN NADA DE CARMEN LAFORET*

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**Abstract:** This article advances a reading of Carmen Laforet's 1945 novel *Nada* through the lens of gothic imagery and vampirism to explore the ways in which the author both significantly contributes to and continues an intertextual literary tradition dating back to the nineteenth century foregrounding the agency and subjectivity of female characters. The allusions and presence of vampirism interwoven throughout the text at once subvert the locus of narrative agency and interrogate traditional notions of heteronormative and patriarchal gender norms in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Spanish society while highlighting the bonds of female friendship and the open exploration of sexuality. The presence of the female vampire as a narrative device in the novel thereby actively engages a feminist criticism openly questioning historically imposed gender distinctions, the roles of women in private and public spheres, and the process of identity formation.

**Keywords:** agency, Laforet, *Nada*, sexuality, vampirism.

**Resumen:** Este artículo avanza una lectura de la novela *Nada* (1945) de Carmen Laforet mediante un enfoque en lo gótico y vampírico para explorar la manera en la cual la autora a su vez contribuye y continua una tradición literaria intertextual proveniente del siglo diecinueve, enfatizando la agencia y la subjetividad de los personajes femeninos. Las alusiones y la presencia del vampirismo imbricadas dentro del texto subvierten el lugar de agencia narrativa y cuestionan nociones tradicionales en cuanto a las normas de género, heteronormativas y patriarcales de la sociedad española en los siglos

diecinueve y veinte. La presencia del vampiro femenino como técnica narrativa en la novela aporta un enfoque dentro la crítica feminista que abiertamente cuestiona las distinciones de género históricamente impuestas, el papel de la mujer en las esferas pública y privada y el proceso de la formación de la identidad.

**Palabras clave:** agencia, Laforet, *Nada*, sexualidad, vampirismo.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

**D**irected by Beatriz Jaén and starring Júlia Roch in the role of the narrator-protagonist Andrea, the premiere of the first ever stage adaptation of Carmen Laforet's *Nada* (1945) at the Centro Dramático Nacional in Madrid on 8 November 2024 brought renewed attention to one of the most widely read novels of twentieth-century Spain on the eightieth anniversary of its publication. With performances taking place six times a week over a two-month period and an almost three-hour run time, the production of *Nada* looked to engage a broad spectatorship both familiar and unfamiliar with the novel on equal ground. In the words of playwright Joan Yago, the intended effect was that “quien no haya leído la novela tenga una experiencia cercana a la de leer la novela y salga de allí con ganas de decir ‘me voy a comprar el libro’ y que quien conozca la novela reconozca en nuestro *Nada*, en nuestra versión teatral, una experiencia muy cercana a la que tuvo cuando la leyó” (Artezblai, 2024). Foregrounding the hunger and poverty resulting from the material destruction leveled during the Spanish Civil War, Yago and Jaén's adaptation and staging placed particular emphasis on the novel's themes of violence against women, the open exploration of sexuality, and the bonds of female friendship in a context marked by extreme physical and psychological degradation.

Awarded the inaugural Premio Nadal in 1944, *Nada* is widely considered a foundational narrative portraying the lived experiences and interpersonal struggles during the unstable postwar period. At the same time, Laforet's novel has garnered substantial critical attention over the years, generating debate, and vastly broadening the interpretive parameters of a work that is, ostensibly, about nothing.<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Thomas highlights how “there exists among critics a very basic conflict [...] some feel that *Nada* is a pessimistic book” while others “have observed that *Nada* relates a positive story” (1978, p. 57). Samuel Amago posits that “perhaps it is the novel's ambiguity that makes it such a rich ground for interpretation” (2002, p. 66). The critical tapestry of meaning layered on Laforet's text is furthered by the intertextual allusions permeating the pages of the novel. Barry Jordan points out, for instance, that “*Nada* draws heavily on other writers and narrative types” (1993, p. 92). This is perhaps unsurprising given that Carmen Laforet herself was an avid reader and enjoyed access to her father's library (Caballé & Rolón-Barada, 2019). Jordan observes how *Nada* is “indebted to

<sup>1</sup> “Toda la prensa de la época se hizo eco del galardón y comentó la obra” writes Raquel Conde Peñalosa, “y ningún estudio de narrativo del siglo veinte ha omitido este texto” (2004, p. 190).

the influence of the nineteenth-century English novel” (1993, p. 92), contains “strong reminiscences of Dickens” in the “evocation of its Gothic atmospheres” (1993, p. 92), and “indicates a knowledge of some of Dostoevsky’s schizophrenic character creations” (1993, p. 92). Yago frames *Nada* as a modern day “relato de terror” (García Miranda, 2024), in large measure due to the portrayal of sexual and physical violence together with what he describes as the “violencia sistémica que recibe Andrea de todos esos pretendientes vampiros que intentan convertirla en su chica” (2024).

This article takes up Yago’s quote and advances a close reading of the gothic undercurrents and, specifically, the vampiric resonances that can be found in *Nada* to revisit the extent to which metaphorical and symbolic vampiric imagery fashion the novel’s thematic content and call attention to the subversive qualities latent in the text. While the scope of analysis centers on the characters of Andrea, Ena, Gloria, and Román, I consider the ways in which the other inhabitants of the Aribau apartment impact the narrative to demonstrate how vampiric elements ultimately become an embodied feature and serve as a microcosm for the economic, gender, and social issues of postwar Spanish society during the early 1940s. A deeper examination of the vampiric imagery in *Nada* has remained an understudied critical facet of the novel. As a result, foregrounding the gothic and vampiric elements underscore Laforet’s narrative depiction and commentary on the development of female friendship, sexual agency, and the subversion of traditional patriarchal gender roles.

## 2. VAMPIRIC NARRATIVES AND GENDER ANXIETIES IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Vampiric imagery in literature points to the ways in which the uniquely transformative qualities of the vampire figure carry impact the process of identity formation and subjectivity, most notably in times of existential anxiety and ontological uncertainty. William Patrick Day observes that recent “vampire stories have addressed the loss of secure frameworks about human nature” (2002, p. 4). The figure of the vampire embodies perceptions of a society in flux, collapsing the boundaries delimiting prescribed social norms, gender distinctions, and hierarchical notions of class. In *Our Vampires, Ourselves*, Nina Auerbach points out that in “England (at least until the coming of Dracula), vampires offered an intimacy that threatened the sanctioned distance of class relationships and the hallowed authority of husbands and fathers” (1997, p. 6). Coalescing around the themes of “power, sexuality, and gender” (Day, 2002, p. 8), the subversive presence of the vampire questions these very notions, destabilizing the heteronormative and patriarchal foundations of society, and throwing them into crisis.

The figure of the vampire became firmly established within the literary spotlight and the cultural imaginary during the nineteenth century. The multifaceted nature of the vampire – at once a synthesis of any number of economic, gender, historical, medical, national, political, social, and temporal issues – made it a compelling textual element, regardless of genre. For Day, “this is the attraction of the vampire, the promise of the transgressive, the subversive, even the revolutionary” (2002, p. 4). Carol Senf details how the vampire widely

“appears in realistic fictions [...] in works that combine realistic elements with romance [...] and even in nonfiction such as *Capital* and *The Condition of the Working Class in England*” (1988, p. 26). Sara L. Robinson additionally highlights the value of the vampire figure, arguing that:

as a political metaphor, vampires possessed endless flexibility. Vampires illustrated a wide range of issues simultaneously. The new political, cultural, and scientific movements, whatever seemed to be threatening to destabilize society, were considered ‘vampires’ [...] So were women in search of political and cultural emancipation from existing gender conventions [...] vampires embodied most of the major anxieties attendant on modernity (2011, p. xv)

The vampire thereby constituted a society in flux and a representation of a perceived threatening or destabilizing ‘Otherness’ to conventional values and social mores.

Typifying the nineteenth-century fusion of gothic and realist conventions, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) would emerge as a “novel with a contemporary setting, plausible human characters, and a narrative structure that reinforces that the events are ordinary” (Senf, 1988, p. 73). Though James Malcolm Rymer’s serialized *Varney the Vampire* (1845-1847) and John William Polidori’s “The Vampyre” (1819) predate Stoker’s novel as examples of nineteenth-century prose incorporating the figure of the vampire, *Dracula* stands as one of the first publications in which the vampire is depicted as “a character that combines both a Gothic and a realist dimension and, therefore, becomes a social metaphor” (1988 p. 73). In this manner, Count Dracula figures as a dangerous and foreign ‘Other,’ attempting to stake its claim within the English Victorian economic structure while deeply challenging the masculine sexual authority of the other male characters in the novel.

Nonetheless, Robinson points out that, in fact, “most of the vampires populating the fiction of our period [the nineteenth and early-twentieth century] are female” (2011, p. 156). Novels such as Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872) and films like Carl Dreyer’s *Vampyr* (1929) significantly employ the figure of the female vampire in their pages and on the silver screen. The female vampire thereby came to accrue its own unique signification due to both its inversion, as well as subversion, of traditional sexual mores and codes of conduct. Angela Tumini highlights how “the *vampirese* could be used as a metaphor for an emerging new woman willing to undertake the sexual and intellectually active roles previously denied in the restricted ‘compound’ of the patriarchal world” (2013, p. 132). Readers familiar with Stoker’s *Dracula* will likely recognize this reference to the ‘new woman’ as if it were drawn from the lips of Mina Harker herself, who affirms that “the New Woman won’t condescend in future to accept; she will do the proposing herself” (2015, p. 111). Mina’s words here voice the need for a greater sense of female agency together with a firm and rebellious stance against heteronormative and patriarchal social attitudes.

The ‘New Woman’ thereby signified a profound renegotiation of and rebellion against patriarchal norms, and of the expectations placed upon women. In her studies on *Dracula*, Senf recalls how the ‘New Woman’ was “often a professional woman who chose financial independence and personal fulfilment as alternatives to marriage and motherhood” (1988, p. 35). Frequently brandished to denote scorn and derision, Senf points out that the

term “nevertheless revealed anxieties about the campaign for women’s suffrage, for property rights, for equal access to education and sometimes (although rarely explicitly) for the right to sexual self-determination” (2017, p. 115). Within the context of Spain, Carmen Martín Gaité described these women who go against the grain of heteronormative codes of conduct as ‘chicas raras’, a “paradigma de mujer, que de una manera o de otra pone en cuestión la ‘normalidad’ de la conducta amorosa y doméstica que la sociedad mandaba acatar” (1987, p. 99). The differential aspect of the ‘chica rara’ is akin to that described by Day of vampiric figures, who are “by classification outsiders [...] the story of the vampire protagonist is typically a story of the struggle to find an elusive freedom, self-acceptance, and community” (2002, p. 35). It is noteworthy that the Spanish designation of ‘rara’ echoes Robinson’s observation that vampiresses “are not angels turned into whores but human women who have become something very strange, beings in whom traditional distinctions between male and female have been lost and traditional roles confusingly mixed” (2011, p. 146). *Dracula* and its vampiric predecessors constitute a textual synthesis of vampirism, Otherness, and shifting gender conventions. Making its appearance on the literary scene almost fifty years later, *Nada* is comprised of many of these same elements.

As Martín Gaité notes, the appearance of the ‘chica rara’ represents a profound subversion of expectations and textual depictions of women protagonists in Spanish literature in the years leading up to the publication of *Nada*. Typifying the literary landscape of the time were works broadly pertaining to the genre of the ‘novela rosa,’ in which “ningún principio esencial de la femineidad iba a ser puesto en cuestión y de que el amor correspondido premiaría al final cualquier claroscuro de la trama, haciendo desembocar la vida azarosa y presuntamente rebelde de aquellas heroínas en el oasis de un hogar sin nubes” (1987, p. 90). In contrast, Ellen Mayock details how Laforet’s “*chicas* and *mujeres raras* [...] push against the simplistic image of the happy housewife and mother, a trope whose cultural import is heightened through the Franco regime and the support given it by the *Sección Femenina*” (2022, p. 131). Through discursive reflexivity and self-referentiality underpinned by the ‘chica rara’ narrator, *Nada* underscores the strategies considered by Hélène Cixous whereby “woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing [...] Woman must put herself into the text” (2009, p. 416) in ways reflecting the process and identity formation beyond the boundaries of the private sphere and the domestic environment. If, following Cixous, “writing is precisely *the very possibility of change*, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures” (2009, p. 419), an engagement with vampiric narratives and imagery effectively contributes to the novel’s critical examination and subtle questioning of gender norms and the social repression of sexuality and female subjectivity.

### 3. GOTHIC ATMOSPHERES, SETTINGS, AND SPACES

In “La novela gótica y paralelos en *Nada* de Carmen Laforet,” Aileen Dever calls attention to gothic elements in the novel in the depictions of spatial confines, atmospheric settings, and character behavior. For example, the narrow and constricting staircase leading

to Román's tower dwelling becomes a site inscribed with gothic attributes, where dimly lit corners and shadows obscure the character's vision and constrict movement. Andrea describes "los estrechos y desgastados escalones de mosaico" (2004, p. 25) worn down over time and how, in one instance, she had "la impresión de que, delante de mí, en la sombra, bajaba alguien" (2004, p. 51). References to shadowy staircases with vague and indeterminate figures cloaked in darkness recall similar representations in literature and film, notably F. W. Murnau's 1922 film *Nosferatu* and, more recently, Robert Egger's 2024 cinematic adaptation of the *Nosferatu* tale. The expressionistic play on light and shadows in both Murnau's silent horror film and Egger's production generates a parallel effect in *Nada*, reinforcing the gothic atmosphere of the interior spatial setting of the Barcelona apartment building.

Other examples abound where the reader can locate what Dever characterizes as gothic "escenarios claustrofóbicos, cerrados, oscuros, ruinosos o atestados" (2007, p. 65). Andrea's first impression of the hallway in the foyer is described as "un recibidor alumbrado por la única y débil bombilla que quedaba sujeta a uno de los brazos de la lámpara, magnífica y sucia de telarañas, que colgaba del techo. Un fondo oscuro de muebles colocados unos sobre otros" (Laforet, 2004, p. 25). Her childhood memories of the apartment are instantly dashed as she has the impression of stepping into a waking nightmare (2004, p. 25). Andrea confesses the intense anxiety she feels in such cramped quarters, compounded by an overwhelming of the senses, and depicted as "angustioso, y en el piso un calor sofocante como si el aire estuviera estancado y podrido" (2004, p. 26). Images of suffocation permeate the domestic space of Aribau, signaling allusions of Andrea feeling entombed or interred within the confines of the apartment. Renee Congdon observes how the senses of hearing and smell become particularly acute for Andrea and reach overwhelming proportions in moments of physical and emotional distress, to the point that the stifling and suffocating atmosphere is likened to that of "un ataúd cerrado" (2022, p. 146). Andrea's flight to the bathroom immerses her in a haunting "casa de brujas [...] Las paredes tiznadas conservaban la huella de manos ganchudas, de gritos de desesperanza" (2004, p. 29), further spotlighting the nightmarish quality of this confining space.

As a novel suffused with gothic imagery, *Nada* inscribes itself within a literary tradition dating back to the Enlightenment where a literary and historical transition involved a progression towards "contemporary settings" (Senf, 1988, p. 24) replacing the "shadowy backgrounds, remote in time and place" (1988, p. 24) of the first gothic novels. Writers the likes of Mary Shelley, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Polidori, and Stoker engaged a style of fiction placing greater emphasis on textual realism and privileging the psychological complexity of their characters "who appear perfectly ordinary" (1988, p. 10). Similarly, authors such as George Eliot and Charlotte and Emily Brontë sought to "encourage their readers to see that awe and dread – in many cases, even horror – are present in the most mundane social situations" (1988, p. 28). In their novels, these writers accomplished a shift in literary sensibility, serving as a reflection of a changing – primarily Victorian – culture attempting to come to terms with social issues such as "the conflict between the individual and the community" (1988, p. 28) and its own gender-based anxieties.

In the case of Spain, Jean Grugel and Tim Rees outline the state of flux characterizing twentieth-century Spanish society, particularly when it came to the conventions regarding gender-related issues. The advent of the Second Republic in 1931 had ushered in a greater push towards legal representation concerning women's suffrage and increased visibility in social and political spheres beyond the confines of the domestic household. However, the Franco dictatorship would quickly stifle further advances. As Grugel and Rees note, "the overall result of regime policies was that, in the name of the family, all the rights won by women before the civil war were rolled back, to be replaced by an extreme form of patriarchal rule based on an ideology of separate spheres" (1997, p. 134). In this new dawn of social regression, women were once again relegated to the domestic sphere "to fulfill their biologically determined destiny as wives and mothers" (1997, p. 134). Although Andrea enrolls in university, the expectations her aunt Angustias ultimately has of her as a young woman – and of women in general – serve as a reflection of conservative and traditional values: "solo hay dos caminos para la mujer. Dos únicos caminos honrosos..." (Laforet, 2004, p. 104). Angustias thus echoes the sentiment that women must either enter into marriage, thereby becoming one more 'angel of the hearth,' or enter into a convent.

The ambiguity and paradoxical nature of attempts to come to terms with what was considered the 'woman question,' where women "were seen as both the source of all virtue and of all vice in society" (Grugel and Rees, 1997, p. 134) is, however, not unique to Spain. The ideological struggle over women's roles extends to the historical significance and cultural impact of the figure of the vampire – and of monstrous imagery broadly – as a reflection of a changing society.<sup>2</sup> As Robinson argues, "considering gender ideals during the late nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries [...] At the core of fears related to gender, blood, and vampires rests the inversion of female roles, from the ideal of the nurturing wife and mother to her demonic looking-glass twin [...] selfish rather than selfless" (2011, p. xvii). "Women who deliberately avoided motherhood," writes Robinson, "were considered national parasites – vampires" (2011, p. 160). As it pertained to the Franco dictatorship, the subversive and deviating (i.e. vampiric) woman was one who consciously reneged on her regime-mandated duty to swell the Spanish population through motherhood, and who eschewed traditional, conservative family values anchoring her to the domestic household.

#### 4. REVISITING VAMPIRISM IN ARIBAU

A central motif of the vampire narrative is that of the invitation. As Julieann Ulin explains, this "convention [...] is that the invitation must precede the entrance of the vampire into the home" (2013, p. 41). Writing about the importance of the invitation, Stoker details how it may consist of many forms, including the vampire being "carried, led, helped or in some way welcomed over the threshold" (2013, p. 41). This motif plays an important role in *Nada*, for it is through various forms of invitation – to places, parties, and people – that the

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<sup>2</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes how the "woman who oversteps the boundaries of her gender role risks becoming a Scylla, Weird sister, Lilith [...] Bertha Mason, or Gorgon" (2020, p. 42).

narration progresses, and information and details are relayed to the reader throughout the novel. At the same time, the invitation likewise comprises a structural element within the work for it intertwines the lives of the various characters along the different unfolding temporal planes. The novel itself begins as a direct result of a form of invitation. With little more than her suitcase full of books in tow, Andrea arrives in Barcelona ready to begin her university studies thanks to the epistolary correspondence between Angustias and Andrea's cousin, Isabel. The result of this exchange of letters culminates in Andrea's midnight arrival at the Barcelona train station and, with it, the opening of the novel.

Numerous other invitations abound, all related to the characters embodying vampiric elements. Indeed, part of the reason Andrea ventures to the different rooms in the apartment and the lived experiences of its inhabitants is made possible by invitations. She is first invited into Angustias's room (2004, p. 35), Gloria later invites her into her bedroom (2004, p. 43), and, finally, Román asks if she would like to accompany him up to his attic dwelling (2004, p. 47). On the night that Andrea follows Juan through the dark and winding streets of Barcelona the reader is made aware of their financial situation by means of an invitation for Andrea to enter the storefront (2004, p. 179). Andrea – and readers along with her – thus learn about the characters, their histories, and stories as we accompany her across these thresholds and into their past and present lives. Narrative exposition in *Nada* is thereby achieved by means of a recourse to a motif common to vampiric cultural production. Similarly, the novel draws to a close by way of the invitation by Ena's father, offering Andrea a helping hand into their family car towards a new life and a new future in Madrid.

At the novel's outset, Andrea is introduced to the reader by means of her midnight arrival at the train station. Finding herself alone in the darkness, she resolves to take “uno de esos coches de caballo que han vuelto a surgir después de la guerra” (2004, p. 24) to the Aribau apartment. In this manner, *Nada* begins by hinting towards an intertextual reference to Le Fanu's *Carmilla*. The titular vampiress, Carmilla – much like Andrea – is brought forth into the narrative in the dead of night and by means of a horse-drawn carriage. In Le Fanu's narrative, emphasis is similarly placed on the midnight hour and the appearance of a full moon: “when the moon shone with a light so intense it was well known that it indicated a special spiritual activity [...] At this moment the unwonted sound of carriage wheels and many hoofs upon the road, arrested our attention” (2013, pp. 13-14). The ‘young lady’ who appears, Carmilla, shares some of the same personality traits as Andrea. Matthew Beresford describes Carmilla's appearance as a “young and innocent girl” (2008, p. 125), whose unassuming demeanor generates sympathy. This makes it “easier to understand her feelings and emotions, especially her need for friendship and love” (2008, p. 125), paralleling the ways Andrea navigates the trials and tribulations in her own relationships and friendships.

For lack of a better sleeping arrangement, Angustias has hastily prepared for Andrea “una cama turca, cubierta por una manta negra” (2004, p. 30). Andrea can't help comparing this makeshift bed to an “ataúd” (2004, p. 30), reinforcing the iconic imagery of the vampire sleeping in a coffin. One of her feverish dreams likewise draws comparisons between Andrea and the vampire figure, when she recounts how “[U]na vez recuerdo que vino a verme

Antonia [...] y su cara se mezcló a mis sueños afilando un largo cuchillo” (2004, p. 62). The image of the knife Antonia clutches as she approaches Andrea’s sleeping body is suggestive of the stake, often of metal in historical depictions and accounts of vampirism. A similar scene is described in Stoker’s *Dracula* by way of the diary of Dr. Steward, who notes how “Van Helsing walked over to Lucy’s coffin [...] [...] There lay Lucy, seemingly just as we had seen her the night before the funeral” (2015, p. 247). By comparison, Le Fanu’s novel depicts a Carmilla whose “eyes were open; no cadaverous smell exhaled from the coffin [...] there was a faint but appreciable respiration, and a corresponding action of the heart. The limbs were perfectly flexible, the flesh elastic” (2013, p. 92). The common thread of these descriptions lies in the liminality of the three female figures. Even in the more explicitly vampiric examples of Lucy and Carmilla, there is nevertheless a manifestly apparent ambiguity, attesting to the nature of a figure blurring the boundaries between what is considered life and death.

As Andrew A. Anderson has pointed out, Andrea is stricken by various forms of physical and psychological maladies during her year-long stay in Barcelona. Already a subjective first-person narrator, Anderson suggests that Andrea’s “physical and mental health may also shape her ‘take’ on the people and the material reality around her” (2011, p. 544). What should stand as a faithful narrative account becomes largely distorted by a series of fevers, headaches, insomnia, nightmares, hunger, and other pathological symptoms articulated in historical depictions of hysteria and schizophrenia. It is worth noting here that the ailments afflicting Andrea – common when food has become a scarce resource – also served as the historical basis for seventeenth and eighteenth century “medical explanations for vampirism” (Keith, 2013, p. 63). “Several diseases, including pellagra, porphyria, rabies, and schizophrenia,” writes Edward O. Keith, “have been proposed as the genesis of the vampire myth” (2013, p. 63). These and other pathologies and afflictions are reflected in several of the characters in *Nada*, most notably Andrea, Román, Juan, and Antonia.

Concerning Andrea’s depleting physical condition, connections might be drawn between her own behavior and that ascribed to pellagra, “first recognized in 1735, during an epidemic of vampire reports” (2013, p. 66). As Keith explains, “[B]ecause of the deficiency of niacin, pellagra causes the neurons in the brain to degenerate, causing dementia with symptoms such as insomnia, anxiety, unjustified aggression, and depression” (2013, p. 67). Niacin is an essential vitamin found in yeast, rice, meat, and fish, all sources of sustenance that Andrea rarely gets to consume amidst a surrounding context of food scarcity. This hunger-related vitamin deficiency sheds further light on Andrea’s behavior in the novel. Andrea herself recognizes that with each passing day, “mi cabeza se volvía más débil y me sentía reblandecida, con los ojos húmedos por cualquier cosa” (Laforet, 2004, p. 263). Her frequent and sudden outbursts at her friend, Ena, recall those of Le Fanu’s Laura, who “cannot account for these passionate outbursts” (Robinson, 2011, p. 184) that seemingly defy reason.

All these previous symptoms make their way into Laforet’s novel at various points and become embodied in other characters as well. The grandmother, for instance, reveals

her insomnia when she confesses to Andrea that “[Y]o nunca duermo, hijita, siempre estoy haciendo algo en la casa por las noches. Nunca, nunca duermo” (2004, p. 29). Juan repeatedly subjects his wife, Gloria, to physical abuse, often without reason and in an apparent frenzy described as ‘rabid’ (2004, p. 40). Antonia’s “verdosa dentadura” (2004, p. 26) is comparable to porphyria, causing a notable “discoloration of teeth” (Keith, 2013, p. 63). These and other afflictions produce a narrative atmosphere populated by figures blurring “the line between the human and the monster” (Day, 2002, p. 6) and reflecting a relentless process of degradation and dehumanization towards nightmarish physical qualities and personality traits.

Hunger is certainly a determining factor in Andrea’s behavior and becomes more acute as the novel progresses. She describes her “visión desenfocada de mis nervios demasiado afilados por un hambre” (Laforet, 2004, pp. 141-142). The physical vehicle of hunger leads to one of the more unsettling episodes in the novel. After Andrea rescues a soaked and beaten Gloria from the bathroom – and from Juan’s ire – she proceeds to dry her off in her room. Andrea’s exhaustion makes her suddenly and painfully aware of how hungry she is: “[M]e sentí hambrienta como nunca lo he estado” (2004, p. 134). As she feels her hunger slowly drive her to the brink of madness, one of the more explicit instances of vampirism occurs. Andrea confesses how in this moment she felt “[G]anas de morder en la carne palpitante, masticar. Tragar la buena sangre tibia...” (2004, p. 134). Andrea quickly dispels these thoughts yet, briefly, Gloria’s blood entices her as an alternative means of sustenance.

Referring to this scene, Amago has drawn parallels between the vampire and nourishment, along with the theme of gender subversion, wherein the female vampire – Andrea in this case – ‘penetrates’ the victim. To this I would add the dual notions of absorption and consumption, given that the imagined act of biting Gloria’s neck and drinking her blood necessarily implies the absorption of Gloria’s life-force and vitality, to be consumed by Andrea. As a result, Andrea would become stronger at the direct expense of a drained and weakened Gloria. In a sense, something similar does take place in the novel. As Andrea absorbs all of Gloria’s stories and consumes them as interlocutor and literary audience, she progressively gains greater awareness of her family’s mysterious background and circumstances, in turn attaining a fuller sense of the dynamics driving their interactions and relationships, which she experiences unfold before her eyes.

This scene with the bathroom, blood, absorption, and consumption is echoed in the closing pages. After Román’s death has been discovered, Andrea escapes to the bathroom and proceeds to take a shower. Much critical attention has been dedicated to disentangling this unsettling scene. Wilma Newberry, for instance, argues that this “last shower [...] shows her desperate attempt to dissociate herself from the events in the house (1984, p. 24). In a similar vein, Mizrahi contends that Andrea’s shower can be interpreted as a desire to “desinfectarse de la culpa a vergüenza ajena” (2010, p. 136). The act of showering in this moment of the novel certainly stands as symbolic of a form of ‘cleansing,’ of an attempt to rid the body of any source of uncleanness.

However, a closer look at the dynamics of the imagery as a whole reveal something complex at work. Motivated by an almost automatic impulse, Andrea immediately heads to the bathroom to shower once she has learned of Román's death. As the novel makes clear, Román has died in the attic, spatially located above the apartment. As she showers, Andrea imagines Román's body "tendido, sangriento" (Laforet, 2004, p. 269), his throat slit open. The narrative depiction of this scene alludes to an equivalence between Román's blood spilled on the floor – most likely already seeping into the floorboards – and the water of the shower washing over Andrea's body. It is therefore possible to establish a parallel downward trajectory of the blood-water as it leaves Román's body and is subsequently 'absorbed' by Andrea. This scene reinforces the vampiric imagery in the text, much like how earlier Andrea described how Gloria's "cabellos mojados resultaban oscuros y viscosos como sangre sobre la almohada" (2004, p. 133).

##### 5. ENA'S SHINING EYES AND VAMPIRESSES

During her time in Barcelona, Andrea befriends the immensely popular Ena, and both girls cultivate an intense friendship that will extend beyond the close of the novel. Andrea repeatedly expresses her affection for Ena, confessing that "aquella era la época más feliz de mi vida, ya que nunca había tenido una amiga con quien me compenetrara tanto" (2004, p. 128). Laforet's depiction of female friendship and sorority echoes *Carmilla*, where "Laura believes she and Carmilla share a 'like temperament,' she finds Carmilla's identity 'infectious'" (Ulin, 2013, p. 50). In fact, according to Auerbach, the bonds of "homoerotic friendship" (1997, p.12) is one of the defining narrative features of *Carmilla*. Amago likewise suggests the "characteristics of a romantic relationship" (2002, p. 76), connecting to Tumini's claim that Dreyer's *Vampyr* "seems to say that [...] lesbian desire must be disguised as vampirism" (2013, p. 127). Ena and Andrea's emotional connection inscribed within a text imbued with allusions to vampiric imagery thereby engages this intertextual tradition of female figures and vampiresses banding and bonding together in the face of conservative, patriarchal mores.

As a character embodying beauty and danger, Ena personifies "fatal seductress" (Robinson, 2011, p. 156) of vampire narratives, otherwise known as the *femme fatale*. Initially unbeknownst to Andrea, Ena has concocted a plan to manipulate Román into falling in love with her, thereby exacting her surrogate revenge for the emotional torment he exerted on her mother, Margarita, years earlier. Her seduction and subsequent manipulation of Román functions to break the stranglehold he had upon her mother and family. No longer the self-proclaimed puppet master, it is now clear to him – along with Andrea and, by extension, the reader – that it was Ena who was pulling the strings the entire time.

As Stevenson observes, "the erotic energy of the female vampires is somehow the count's creation" (1988, p. 146), underscoring the principal agent of transformation as ascribed to Count Dracula himself. Initially it is Román enacting this role by seductively manipulating Margarita, Gloria, and, to his knowledge, Ena. However, Laforet upends traditional notions of male sexual agency as Andrea and the readers discover that it is in fact

Ena who has subverted the role of seductor. As an “active, predatory seducer” (1993, p. 63) herself, Ena engages the process highlighted by Creed by which the “female Dracula is masculinized” (1993, p. 63). Ena actively and consciously deploys her sexual charge and her ‘erotic energy’ as a mechanism of female empowerment and agency to take back control and exert her revenge.

Bodily features of vampirism can be found in the physical characteristics of Ena that Andrea provides the readers. Senf emphasizes how the eyes serve as a locus of power for the vampire. She notes how “hypnotic eyes are important to a creature who ‘captures’ its prey by seduction rather than by physical strength” (1988, p. 9). Indeed, it is Ena’s eyes – and the striking impression they convey – that initially capture Andrea’s attention. Andrea describes her friend’s “agradable y sensual cara, en la que relucían unos ojos terribles” (2004, p. 68). Ena’s shining eyes contrast with the softer features of her face while, at the same time, accentuating a significant physical attribute of one of the most hypnotic characters in the novel.

However, this will not be the only instance in which a character is equated with bright, shining eyes. One morning, Andrea senses “el crujido de una silla rompiendo el sueño y el escalofrío de los nervios” as she wakes to find “dos pequeños ojos luminosos – los ojos del gato – clavados en los míos” (2004, p. 209). Parallel physical descriptions interweave Ena’s seductive manipulation with that of felines, “where it is Ena who ultimately plays the role of the cat” (Glenn, 1977, p. 388). Mizrahi asserts that “Ena se enorgullece de su agencia sexual y usa su encanto subversivamente para jugar con los hombres y burlarse de ellos” (2010, p. 73). Ena herself confesses how she relishes this ‘cat and mouse’ game, “Me gusta mirarlos por dentro [...] tenerles entre mis manos, enredarles con sus propias madejas y jugar como los gatos con los ratones” (Laforet, 2004, p. 138). Later, Ena laughs recalling an exasperated Román when she played ‘hard to get.’ In this moment, Andrea finds Ena “muy guapa, con los ojos brillantes” (2004, p. 359), once again underscoring the sensual and seductive nature of her friend.

Within the discourse of vampiric imagery, color accrues importance as a significant associative characteristic of vampire figures. In *Dracula*, the vampiresses are depicted with “brilliant white teeth, that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips” (Stoker, 2015, p. 51). John Allen Stevenson notes how the vampire women “at Castle Dracula [...] are all primarily red and white” (1988, p. 141). In Laforet’s novel, red and white appear as the colors emblematically associated with Gloria, her porcelain white skin, abundant red hair, and red lips. Upon her initial arrival at Aribau, Andrea paints a narrative portrait of Gloria as she notices that behind her uncle Juan “había aparecido otra mujer flaca y joven con los cabellos revueltos, rojizos, sobre la aguda cara blanca” (Laforet, 2004, p. 28). This chromatic depiction of Gloria’s physical appearance accentuates her sensuality and beauty while harkening back to the two colors predominantly associated with narrative descriptions of vampiric features.

Gloria comprises another character suffused with erotic charge. The regressive social mores and gender conventions of Francoist society worked to suppress sexual liberty and

women's autonomy beyond the household. Yet much like the vampiresses in *Dracula*, who “project themselves as sexual beings and have power to inspire a sexual response in others” (2015, p. 145), one of Gloria's defining features is her sensuality. This stokes a negative reaction within the apartment and accusations leveled against her assumed promiscuity and licentiousness. The infamous episode that is recalled one night during the Civil War when, residing in the castle with various Republican soldiers, Gloria goes to Román's room and is subsequently ridiculed by him only serves to further denigrate her character in the eyes of the family members. Angustias frames Gloria as a deviant and the paragon of a ‘lost woman,’ serving as a living reminder to Andrea of what she will become or – perhaps worse – perceived to have become if she continues to go out in the city by herself at night and live so independently.

Though little is known about Gloria's life – the exception being, like Andrea, she is also an orphan – what remains clear is that her lived experiences during the Civil War have had a profound effect on her. Her desire to spend the night with Román – signaling a human need for affection amidst a war-torn society – has been subsequently distorted and reframed by Román, Angustias, and Antonia, to the point that Gloria is painted as a lustful and debauched woman. Like the figure of the female vampire, Gloria represents a person who has “been profoundly changed” (Stevenson, 1988, p. 146) and where “the pure and spiritual become voluptuous” (1988, p. 146). However, the fact that it was Gloria who initially incited the encounter with Román signals a subversion of the location of sexual agency. In doing so, Gloria echoes the vampiresses by pushing beyond the limiting scope of the Madonna/Whore classifications to which the other family members wish to encase her by virtue of heteronormative codes of social conduct. She is instead fashioned as an active sexual transgressor whose initiative effectively places her within the realm historically ascribed to male figures.

Recalling historical and literary vampiric references, Román also appears to “oscillate between a diabolic and wicked aura and one of fascination and charisma” (Keith, 2013, p. 61). This dichotomy is perhaps best established in Andrea's initial description of Román, where the attractiveness of his “pelo rizado y la cara agradable e inteligente” (Laforet, 2004, p. 38) contrasts with the danger of the gun he is openly cleaning. For Amago, this act “symbolizes Román's menacing, masculine power over the family” (2002, p. 68) while at the same time reinforcing what Mark P. Del Mastro has observed as the fixation of power and control located in the hands of the various characters. Interestingly, Andrea's depiction of Román evokes the ‘Ruthven formula’ in vampire narratives, after the character of Lord Ruthven in Polidori's *The Vampyre* to illustrate “a villain who is suave and aristocratic yet dangerous and alluring” (2008, p. 119).

Throughout, Román is framed as a resurrected figure. As Gloria shares the story of Román's imprisonment and torture during the war, she describes how upon his return, “era como si resucitara otro muerto” (2004, p. 61), conjuring images of revenant and a return of the undead. Andrea herself imagines Román as someone back from the dead to inhabit the land of the living by confessing how she perceives Román to be “el espectro de un muerto.

De un hombre que hubiera muerto muchos años atrás y que ahora se volviera por fin a su infierno” (2004, p. 272). The vampiric aspect of resurrection becomes embodied in Román who, much like the vampire vanquished by the stake, suffers physical death at the end of the novel.

Román is further imbued with vampiric qualities due to the mysterious nature of his work and sources of income. As Anderson notes, “at first his absences and trips [...] are just one more facet of his distinctive personality until we discover his smuggling and black market activity” (2011, p. 555). Román thereby emerges as a figure at the margins of an economic structure, acquiring wealth by means of illegality, exploitation, and fraud. The Spanish physician, Gregorio Marañón, openly criticized the black market and the high level of corruption it unleashed. Equating such corruption with vampiric imagery, Marañón denounced how “demasiados altos cuadros de la política especulaban con productos alimenticios de primera necesidad y chupan la sangre del pueblo” (1946).<sup>3</sup> Read in this light, Román participates in a dysfunctional economic and financial structure where the highest levels of law and order swore relentless persecution of the ‘blood suckers’ of the economy while at the same time fueling the very corruption and illegality they purportedly sought to destroy. By engaging in black market contraband and smuggling, Román actively drains the economic lifeblood of the body politic and postwar Spanish society.

## 6. CONCLUSION

*Nada* is a novel suffused with vampiric imagery, playing an intriguing role in fashioning the thematic content and highlighting the subversive qualities of the female figures. By means of an exploration of vampirism and the way it is inscribed within the text and embodied in the different characters, Laforet’s novel engages an intertextual tradition of vampiric narratives while serving as a direct reflection of the historical and cultural moment of the Spanish postwar period. Rosa Navarro Durán affirms that one can never “aprehender del todo la riqueza de una obra clásica porque siempre quedan rincones para infinitas lecturas” (2023, p. 57). Despite being about nothing, *Nada* remains an immensely complex novel awarding space to multiple points of entry for narrative engagement and hermeneutics. A study of the vampiric motifs located within the text and a closer look at how they bleed through the pages of the novel reveal additional interpretive facets directly related to the development of female agency, sexuality, and subjectivity of a work that continues to seduce and captivate the attention of contemporary readership.

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<sup>3</sup> Marañón echoes Karl Marx, who declared that “[C]apitalism is dead labour which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks” (1887, p. 163).

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