Psychosocial Development and Female Identity in Laforet’s *La mujer nueva*

MARK P. DEL MASTRO

*The Citadel*

Abstract

Of Carmen Laforet’s five published novels, three — *Nada* (1945), *La isla y los demonios* (1952) and *La insolución* (1963) — highlight adolescent identity development as their predominant themes. With *La mujer nueva*, however, Laforet takes a slightly different turn by portraying an adult’s search for a new identity, specifically the quest of the married protagonist, Paulina. While past critical attention has focused almost exclusively on Paulina’s religious conversion to Catholicism, this study examines the protagonist’s formation in *La mujer nueva*, using primarily Erik Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development and his identity theory, an important application given the autobiographical elements of this novel. Ultimately and in spite of *La mujer nueva*’s deceptive conclusion, this analysis also shows the protagonist’s growth as a subtle call for female autonomy despite the suppressive values of the Catholic church and Francisco Franco’s regime.

Resumen

De las cinco novelas publicadas por Carmen Laforet, tres — *Nada* (1945), *La isla y los demonios* (1952) y *La insolución* (1963) — tienen como tema principal el desarrollo de la identidad adolescente. En *La mujer nueva* este tema varía un poco al describirse la búsqueda de identidad de una adulta casada, la protagonista Paulina. Aunque pasados estudios se han dedicado casi exclusivamente a la conversión católica de Paulina, este artículo examina la formación de la protagonista usando como referencia principal las fases del desarrollo psicosocial y la teoría de la identidad de Erik Erikson, lo cual es un enfoque destacado al considerar los elementos autobiográficos de esta novela. Finalmente, y a pesar de la conclusión engañosa de *La mujer nueva*, este análisis también señala que el progreso de la protagonista es una petición sutil para la autonomía femenina, a pesar de los valores represivos que entrañaban la Iglesia Católica y el régimen franquista.

The recurrent theme of identity development in Carmen Laforet’s novels clearly reflects the author’s exploration and struggles with the multiple, sometimes conflicting roles — both public and private — that she held throughout her
own life as renowned writer, intellectual, wife, mother and Catholic. Of her five novels, three — *Nada* (1945), *La isla y los demonios* (1952) and *La insolución* (1963) — highlight adolescent identity development. With *La mujer nueva* (1955), however, Laforet takes a slightly different turn by portraying an adult’s identity crisis and subsequent search-for-self.\(^1\) Specifically, it is the story of Paulina, a 33-year-old mother of one who chooses to leave home in Villa de Robre (summer of 1949) to re-establish her sense of identity in Madrid because of ideological differences with conservative Spain, guilt for an ongoing love affair with Antonio, her husband’s cousin, and emotional distance from her spouse. While on the train to Spain’s capital, Paulina subsequently experiences a sort of spiritual conversion that instead of resolving her issues of identity (her conflicting roles of mother, spouse, working woman, mistress and Catholic), actually fosters her continued journey of reflection and self-discovery in the city. In a 1989 interview, Laforet herself explains the 1951 event that both provoked a similar search in her own life and inspired the novel:

> It [*La mujer nueva*] grew out of something that happened to me while I was passing by a fountain at El Retiro Park in Madrid. All of a sudden, I felt a tremendous surge of happiness and a certainty that humanity was moving toward something wonderful, namely God. I spent three days saying I discovered the world, I discovered life, I discovered religion. I was so happy when I woke up each morning that I would wander in awe in the streets and think that all the horrible, ugly people I saw were actually wonderful because we were all moving toward God. The third day I woke up as I was before, without understanding anything, but knowing that this had happened to me. (Gazarian 1991: 157)

After this ‘quasi-mystical experience’ (Johnson 1981: 28), Laforet spent one to two years trying to be ‘dogmatically religious’ (Gazarian 1991: 157), and a total of nearly seven years attempting to reconcile her questions about the Catholic faith. Her husband Manuel Cerezales, whom Laforet married in 1946 but from whom she separated definitively in 1970, motivated her to write *La mujer nueva* to portray this spiritual experience, one that Laforet depicts in her novel as a complex psychological process of a woman — in many ways like the author herself — who, in addition to and beyond gaining religious perspective, seeks a free identity in an oppressive society.\(^2\) Despite this profound treat-

\(^1\) In *Al volver la esquina* (May 2004), Laforet’s fifth and last published novel and the sequel to *La insolución*, the 47-year-old protagonist, Martín Soto, searches the past for existential meaning with the aid of Dr. Leutari, a female psychotherapist. Although this process of recollection does not resolve for Martín his questions of identity, it does reflect the author’s profound awareness of psychological development, a predominant theme in *La mujer nueva* and Laforet’s other novels. *Al volver la esquina* and *La insolución* correspond to the trilogy *Tres pasos fuera del tiempo*, but Laforet never finished the series’ last book, *Jaque mate*. With the exception of corrections that she incorporated later, Laforet completed *Al volver la esquina* by the end of 1973, but she did not authorize its publication until shortly before her death on February 28, 2004.

\(^2\) For more extensive biographical accounts of Laforet’s life, see the books by Inmaculada de la Fuente (2002), Laforet’s youngest son, Agustín Cerezales (1982), and Roberta Johnson (1981).
ment of self-discovery, and since the novel’s publication, critical attention has focused almost exclusively on Paulina’s religious conversion to Catholicism.\(^3\) Even recent studies by Pedraza Jiménez and Rodríguez Cáceres (2000), Barroso (1997), and Quintana Tejera (1997) still fixate on the protagonist’s conversion despite Roberta Johnson’s attempt in 1981 to sway scholars to examine the novel’s second layer, ‘the implicit sociocritical aspect’ of Laforet’s work (84).\(^4\) However, two critics seem to have responded to Johnson’s prompting: Rólón Barada (Laforet 2003) identifies the novel’s social criticism in terms of Laforet’s ‘contribución personal al movimiento feminista de la literatura española de posguerra’ (11, 13), and Francisca López (1995) asserts that reading ‘entre líneas’ exposes the feminist message found in the questioning of Spain’s myths of marriage, contraceptives, etc (49). Still absent from published studies, nevertheless, is an effort to explain the novel’s theme of female identity development through a psychoanalytical study of the protagonist, although some scholars have indeed alluded to the novel’s psychological dimension.\(^5\) In an attempt to fill this void, the following study will examine Paulina’s formation in *La mujer nueva* using primarily Erik Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development and his identity theory, an important application given the autobiographical elements of this novel.\(^6\) Ultimately and in spite of *La mujer nueva*’s deceptive conclusion, this analysis will also show the protagonist’s growth as a subtle call for female

\(^3\) A group of ‘altos dignatarios de la Iglesia’ (Prjevalinsky Ferrer 1961: 214), a judges’ panel ‘instutuido para galardonar las novelas que exaltaron los valores humanos y cristianos’ initiated this analytical trend by awarding *La mujer nueva* the Premio Menorca in 1955 (De la Fuente 2002: 101). In 1956, Spain’s Ministry of Information and Tourism presented the Miguel de Cervantes prize, also known as the Premio Nacional de Literatura to *La mujer nueva*, thereby further endorsing what the approving censor Luis Pereda initially and superficially interpreted as a novel with an ‘intención doctrinal […] ejemplarizadora’ (quoted in O’Byrne 1999: 207). Only novels and books of short stories published during the previous six months and submitted directly by authors and publishers were considered for the Miguel de Cervantes award (Martínez Cachero 1985: 238).

\(^4\) Studies by Pérez Firmat (1991), Ullman (1970), Prjevalinsky Ferrer (1961) and Hornedo (1957), among others, also focus on Paulina’s conversion.

\(^5\) Johnson’s work on *La mujer nueva* does not include a psychoanalytical study based upon contemporary theory, but her acknowledgement of Laforet’s ‘enriched handling of human psychology’ (84) in addition to her recognition of Laforet’s own references to social scientists Freud and Adler suggest that Johnson sees the importance of such an approach. Fernando Barroso identifies the adult identity search in *La mujer nueva*, but he avoids a psychological analysis in favor of highlighting Paulina’s conversion. Also sidestepping social science are Francisca López in her explanation of Paulina’s psychological trajectory as ‘poco creíble en más de una ocasión’ (1995: 46), and Illanes Adaro in her vague description of *La mujer nueva* as ‘una obra esencialmente psicológica’ (1971: 132).

\(^6\) Although one could justify an alternative psychoanalytic study using the renowned theories of Freud (ideological mentor of Erikson, though Erikson rejected the significant Freudian concepts of instinct and the unconscious) and Jung, this article intentionally avoids such an approach for two connected reasons: 1) the difficulty for social scientists to generate empirical data to support Freud and Jung’s ideas about the unconscious; 2) the consequent waning presence of Freud and Jung’s theories in contemporary human-development literature. In their largely Eriksonian-based views of human development, today’s social scientists appreciate, but generally shun, Freud’s and Jung’s ideas.
autonomy despite the suppressive values of the Catholic Church and Francisco Franco’s regime.

First, a summary of Erikson’s theory will add insight into this article’s approach. In the 1950s and 60s, Erikson pioneered the foundation upon which current identity theory and research are still based. The now cliché term ‘identity crisis’ is both original and central to Erikson’s theory and refers to the process by which youth attempt to establish their identities. However, despite identity issues being more prominent during adolescence, Erikson recognizes that identity formation is not restricted to youth since adults frequently experience the corresponding crisis while re-visiting many aspects of the adolescent search for self. During this crisis period, which Erikson names a ‘psychosocial moratorium’ (Erikson 1968: 156), the individual explores different life options, trying on different selves through interactions with other people and sampling different ideologies with the objective of establishing a sense of trust and faith in others. With ‘identity confusion’, the person fails either to identify with a group or to assume a specific role in society, and therefore they tend to over-identify desperately with inappropriate ‘heroes’ of cliques and groups (131–32). The success of identity formation, therefore, relies upon the person’s choices of identification, his/her adoption of ideologies, and society’s response to these selections. The extreme outcome could then be what Erikson calls a ‘negative identity’ where the individual’s choices do not align with what the immediate society considers acceptable (174).

Erikson also observes that the overall life span can be divided into eight general categories or stages: infancy (stage I), early childhood (II), play age (III), school age (IV), adolescence (V), young adulthood (VI), adulthood (VII), and old age (VIII). The respective psychosocial crises for these stages are basic trust vs. basic mistrust (stage I), autonomy vs. shame and doubt (II), initiative vs. guilt (III), industry vs. inferiority (IV), identity vs. identity confusion (V), intimacy vs. isolation (VI), generativity vs. stagnation (VII), and integrity vs. despair (VIII) (Erikson 1997: 32–33). Generativity in stage VII, adulthood, includes ‘procreativity, productivity, and creativity’ (67). With the failure of generative fulfilment, the adult becomes self-centered and idle while likely returning to prior periods of Eriksonian development such as stage VI, young adulthood, and/or stage V, adolescence, which are characterized by the aforementioned crises of ‘intimacy vs. isolation’ and ‘identity vs. identity confusion’, respectively (56–57). In La mujer nueva, Paulina, like Laforet herself, experiences an identity crisis while recon-

7 Arnett (2001), Lerner (2002), Moshman (1999) and Shaffer (1999), among many others, recognize Erikson’s impact on contemporary research on identity development. Through almost four decades of his research (1966-present), James E. Marcia, Erikson’s most prominent interpreter today, has refined, operationalized and validated Erikson’s theory with the ‘Identity Status Interview’, a mechanism classifying adolescents — although also pertaining to adults — into one of four identity stages: diffusion, moratorium, foreclosure or achievement. Such studies as Josselson’s 1991 book Finding Herself justify Erikson’s theory by using Marcia’s model not only as the basis of examining the development of both sexes, but also as a valid tool for analyzing female identity formation.
ciling society’s hypocrisy with her newly adopted Roman Catholic ideology and her roles as mother, wife and autonomous working woman until she eventually achieves a new identity.

The question remains, however, of the relevance of North American identity theory to the analysis of *La mujer nueva*, and, consequently, of whether identity development is global. The son of Danes who separated before his birth, raised in Germany by his mother and Jewish stepfather, and a resident of the U.S. from 1933 until his death in 1994, Erikson was acutely sensitive to the role of culture in identity formation, and his theories on human development reflect this understanding. This is especially evident in his book *Young Man Luther* (1958), where he demonstrates his awareness of the cultural and historical contexts of Martin Luther’s identity development during pubescence and early adulthood. And although contemporary researchers of human behavior and identity development recognize that numerous factors affect identity formation (e.g., economy, war, famine, sub-cultures, etc.), they, like Erikson, generally agree that identity growth in the industrialized West (U.S., Canada, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand) is related. Many researchers also recognize that some gender differences do exist for identity formation, and that these differences are frequently cross-cultural in the West.

What differentiate the grown person’s quest-for-self from the adolescent’s are the adult’s ample experiences, relationships and responsibilities, and the lack of a youth’s naiveté, an innocence that promotes optimism, which in turn helps resolve the identity crisis. As is the case with Paulina in *La mujer nueva*, an adult’s already-established identity bound by these complex relationships and obligations complicates his or her re-discovery of self. In contrast to the role-seeking, teenage protagonists in *Nada*, *La isla y los demonios* and *La insolación*, 33-year-old Paulina is already a wife and mother whose identity crisis poses serious implications for her relationship with her son Miguel and her husband Eulogio Nives. Although there are certainly rigid social expectations for the course of an adolescent’s identity search, in Franco’s ultra-conservative, female role-limiting society, an adult, wedded mother encounters inordinate obstacles if she decides to re-evaluate and re-define her ideological framework and social responsibilities. In other words, changing the course of an already established role of wife and mother is almost impossible.

In her three novels of adolescent development, Laforet consistently plays with this notion of impossibility by presenting the protagonist with seemingly insurmountable, socially-imposed hurdles to achieving identity. However, these novels also reflect her own self-proclaimed optimism while affording her protagonists significant advances in their searches-for-self, a strong and positive statement

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8 Studies by Arnett and Moshman, for example, observe that identity formation does not differ greatly among cultures in the West. H. C. Triandis is among those scholars who have consistently found ideological similarities among Western cultures.

9 Erikson, Gilligan (1982), Giovacchini (1979), Marcia and Waterman (1992), among others, have all observed gender differences in identity formation.
for the potential future of young women in Franco’s Spain. By switching the portrayal from an adolescent’s to an adult woman’s identity-search, Laforet also increases social challenges for her protagonist, thereby reinforcing her message of female empowerment. Paulina’s definitive adoption of Catholicism at the conclusion of La mujer nueva first seems a surrendering to social pressures and a resignation to the Sección Femenina’s ideal of the new woman, a view of some critics such as Francisca López (1995: 49). However, in terms of psychosocial development to be discussed below, the protagonist’s acceptance of Catholicism and her re-commitment to her husband and son actually result from ‘sus propias convicciones’ and ‘su propia elección’ where Paulina has actively resolved for herself many ideological contradictions inherent in her country during this period (Laforet 2003: 13).

Even the book’s title reinforces an ideological obstacle for ambitious women: the Sección Femenina’s ‘mujer tradicional antigua y siempre nueva’ (Martín Gaite 1998: 27), the image of the submissive, Catholic female destined to serve her family, country and church while she resists any personal ambitions other than the career of happy homemaker. Paulina, however, is the opposite of this repressed figure: she represents the liberal woman who the Spanish Civil War victors, the dictatorship, openly condemn as a sinful vestige of the ‘rojos’, the defeated Republicans. Conversely, the protagonist’s parents are politically conservative with a strong allegiance to the Church; therefore, yet before the protagonist’s mystical experience and Catholic conversion, Paulina already represents a ‘mujer nueva’, a progressive feminist version that counters the image that both the Sección Femenina and Francisco Franco advocate.

One example of Paulina’s feminism is her smoking, which she shows to her future husband Eulogio in 1936 on the train to Villa de Robre, their town in León. In a gesture of what for conservative Spain is an undesirable social initiative for a female, the protagonist offers a cigarette to Eulogio who responds: ‘No, yo fumo muy poco. Un amigo mío, tú lo conoces, Pepe Vados, dice que eso es una debilidad de mujeres’ (Laforet 1969: 1086). This traditional view of Pepe, parish priest and older brother of Rita, wife of Antonio (the man with whom Paulina later has an affair), foreshadows the strict expectations for social conduct, particularly for a woman, which the Franco regime and the Church will later reinforce together. In Mujeres, María Pilar Morales explains this conservative view toward a smoking female:

En lugares públicos, la mujer que fuma se hace acreedora a las impertinentes galanterías de los hombres indiscretos. Parece ser que el cigarrillo es el distintivo utilizado por las mujeres a quienes gusta llamar la atención, y aparentemente

10 In her interview with Marie-Lise Gazarian, Laforet labels herself an optimist (Gazarian 1991: 163).
11 Founded by the right-wing Falange española in 1934, and complementing the philosophy of both Franco’s dictatorship and the Roman Catholic Church during the following four decades, the Sección Femenina served to reinforce and direct Spain’s female population with the image of the ‘ideal woman’ as submissive wife and devoted mother. See studies by Gallego Méndez (1983) and Suárez Fernández (1993) for more on the Sección Femenina.
ofercen mayores facilidades para una conquista masculina. Todos los hombres, sin excepción, dejan traslucir en sus miradas una curiosidad maliciosa cuando han tropezado sus ojos con una mujer fumadora. E inevitablemente la juzgan mal. (83)

Eulogio’s citing of Pepe Vados certainly reflects this right-wing attitude, but Paulina reacts indifferently.

Further contradicting Spain’s conservative ideology is the protagonist’s unattractive physical appearance — ‘feúcha’ according to her father (1075), ‘nada guapa’ in her grandmother’s eyes (1055), and ‘fea’ to Eulogio (1085) — that Paulina herself conscientiously maintains by rejecting makeup, a decision she makes at age 15 to protest the hypocritical, traditional ideals of her father. Not only does her appearance contrast with the image of the prospective ‘bonita esposa’ (Martín Gaite 1998: 119), but Paulina’s lack of a significant dowry fails Mariana, Eulogio’s mother, who expects her son to marry a beautiful woman ‘que doble el capital’ of the family (1093). As Martín Gaite observes with regard to courtship and love in conservative Spain, of critical importance is the young man’s selection of a spouse whom his mother will approve (1998: 114). Despite knowing his own mother will reject the protagonist for reasons just explained, Eulogio marries Paulina during the civil war and further underscores the protagonist’s pre-conversion role as the feminist version of ‘la mujer nueva’.

Paulina’s flirtatious behavior also defies norms of the ‘antiguo régimen’ (Miguel 1998: 17), the traditional views that still linger in Spanish society despite progressive social changes for women in the years prior to Franco’s dictatorship, especially during the Second Republic (1931–1936). During adolescence, for example, the protagonist’s attraction of men like ‘moscones’ is what her grandmother Bel sees as improper; moreover, the teenaged Paulina remains happy and self-assured as if her conduct were acceptable (1055). Bel’s question to Paulina ‘¿No vas a tener nunca una buena amiga?’ (1055) epitomizes conservative views of the period that women should avoid befriending men in order to sustain the myth of inaccessibility (Martín Gaite 1998: 66), but the protagonist’s unorthodox personality is what eventually lures Eulogio to his commitment, albeit civil, to marriage.

As an additional feminist stance that reflects ideals of the Second Republic, Paulina is educated, earning her university degree in ‘Ciencias Exactas’ in May of 1936, which enables her to work as a math teacher in Madrid to support herself and her son during the nine years (1939–1948) of her husband’s absence; Eulogio is away in Central America for political and personal reasons: he is Republican, and he has an affair with a ‘millonaria histérica’ in Mexico (1038). Of course,

Social changes in early 1900s Spain became evident in such testimony as Cristóbal de Castro’s Las mujeres (1916) that remarks on the new, socially acceptable phenomenon of women in the work place. Along with this progress, the efforts of such Spanish feminism pioneers as Victoria Kent, Clara Campoamor and Carmen de Burgos, among others, greatly assisted the eventual legalization of female suffrage (1931) and divorce (1932), which were both banned in 1939 with Franco’s regime.
Paulina’s financial autonomy during the dictatorship also challenges the conservative view toward working women. As Martín Gaite notes, authorities of the Franco regime generally considered female employment outside of the realm of domestic duties ‘como ocasión de relajamiento y pecado’ (1998: 47). Although Paulina works out of necessity due to her husband’s voluntary exile, her prior association with the Republicans would earn her little empathy from the status quo.

Given these liberal traits of her pre-conversion self, the protagonist appears to possess Erikson’s aforementioned ‘negative identity’, especially considering the clash of her behavior with the ultra-conservative atmosphere of post-war Spain. Consequently, this would seem to explain Paulina’s incentive to re-evaluate herself, but a more careful examination reveals that her decision to leave her husband and family in Villa de Robre is self-initiated and not the result of pressure from Eulogio, his family and the community for her to re-define herself in accordance with society’s mores. She departs to reassess and distance herself from the disturbing elements of her life — her affair, her troubled marriage, her hypocritical family — and contemplate her future in the city (Madrid), an environment where alternate ideological frameworks (options for association) might help her adopt an identity that she, not society, deems acceptable. This initiative is important as yet another of Paulina’s numerous acts against the antifeminist stance of fascist Spain, a country, as Martín Gaite observes, where a wife should tolerate conjugal hardships and feign with her husband a ‘bloque indestructible’ in front of their children (1998: 21). Not only does the protagonist’s decision to leave her spouse stun the public, but Eulogio is virtually incapable of acting against her resolve: ‘Eulogio [...] tenía la convicción de que no podía impedir a Paulina nada de lo que ella quisiera hacer’ (1023). Furthermore, the protagonist herself, understanding the reaction her decision provokes, is surprised by her unrestricted departure as though the true barrier were not physical, but mental, and one that she has already successfully hurdled.

As previously mentioned, hypocrisy, particularly the behavior of family and clergy with respect to Catholic doctrine, is one of the factors that triggers Paulina’s search-for-self. At the novel’s onset, the protagonist has already officially shunned the Church because of the duplicity surrounding her. Paulina’s father, the late Don Pedro Goya, ‘hombre de gustos groseros’ (1075), in addition to hitting his daughter, also beat his wife Isabel regularly, especially when Isabel criticized his ongoing affair with Leonela, the maid. Agents of the Church reinforce this male-chauvinistic attitude when the local priest declares that the world’s evils are due to the indecent dress of women (1076); in addition, the parish clergy consistently advises Isabel to resign to the indiscretions of her ‘marido creyente’ (1071). This also reflects the hypocritical norms manifested later during Franco’s dictatorship, as Martín Gaite attests: ‘si el marido engañaba a la mujer, con tal de que lo hiciera sin demasiado escándalo y de tapadillo, lo mejor era hacer como si nada, que no se enterara nadie, para que los hijos pudieran seguir viendo a sus padres aliados en la tarea de sacarlos adelante a ellos’ (21). Although Paulina’s
consequential view is that the Church represents ‘la excusa de todos los males de la patria, de todos los gamberrismos de los hombres’, her attempts to reject the Church and avoid society and her father’s hypocrisy fail when she engages in an extra-marital affair with Eulogio’s cousin, Antonio, and she consequently suffers overwhelming guilt and confusion (1076–77).

Laforet does not employ Eriksonian-specific language to identify Paulina’s confused state, but the author does use ‘abulia’ (1062), a psychiatric term that many of the Generation of 1898 writers favored at the turn of the century to label the problem of national Spanish identity. In 1893, Ángel Ganivet was the first of the ‘noventayochistas’ to adopt ‘abulia’ to describe Spain’s collective ‘illness’ (1944: 26–27), but the French psychologist Théodule Armand Ribot originally introduced the currently-used clinical term in the late nineteenth century to identify the mental disorder where the will is impaired or lost. Paulina’s abulia is not a disorder in the medical sense, but rather a philosophical crisis where her rejection of the disturbing ideas generated in Villa de Robre and her dissatisfaction with aspects of her own life instigate ideological hesitation.

In Eriksonian terms, the protagonist’s abulia can be described as the negative result of ‘generativity vs. self-absorption and stagnation’, the main crisis of adulthood. This is Paulina’s current phase and the seventh of Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development. Because Paulina is emotionally distant from her husband and son, an outcome of her self-absorption and stagnation or abulia, her unsatisfied generative drive leads her to revisit earlier developmental needs of intimacy and identity. She therefore engages in the extra-marital affair with Antonio, whose relatively young age — eight years Paulina’s junior — further confirms the protagonist’s psychosocial regression while she continues to defy social mores: an affair with a younger man when period customs call for the male to be older than a woman in a socially acceptable relationship (Martín Gaite 1998: 199). Given her marriage and motherhood, and Antonio’s own spouse, Paulina does partially recognize the hopelessness of resolving her conflicts through this socially-prohibited relationship. She first maintains this illicit bond, however, because Franco’s Spain does not recognize her civil marriage and because Antonio may become a widower with the likely death of his cancer-stricken wife, Rita, who is obviously a symbolic victim of Franco’s antifeminism, a cancer itself that kills women figuratively by restricting their freedoms.

13 In his letter to his friend Francisco Navarro y Ledesma on 18 February 1893, Ganivet compares his country’s condition with abulia:

El temor de las ideas es un signo mortal; no es que las ideas se van a perder, es que se va a escapar de nuestro dominio de la inteligencia, que no podemos tener ideas cuando queramos porque la inteligencia no quiera fijarse en los objetos. Esta aversión es muy frecuente en los tontos, porque en ellos la inteligencia no tiene posibilidad de apropiarse sinnúmero de cosas; es también un síntoma de la abulia o debilitación de la voluntad, porque en este padecimiento la vida retrograda, no pudiendo vencer la pereza, que le impide continuar asimilándose elementos nuevos para renovar la vida al compás del tiempo […] La causa de la enfermedad es la falta de atención. (1944: 26–27)

Shaw’s 1998 article ‘More about Abulia’ tracks the origins of abulia in European literature and medicine and summarizes relevant scholarly criticism.
Along with this and other troubling aspects of her life, motherhood leads Paulina to a ‘spiritual conversion’ that is not a mystical event but rather the protagonist’s choice to re-define her identity and relationships. This conversion — the fictionalized depiction of Laforet’s own experience in 1951 — especially represents a choice within the context of Laforet’s life and her first four novels where the identity search is the prevalent theme. Perhaps if La mujer nueva were the final novel the author published, and she remained a devout wife and Catholic, both the author’s and protagonist’s conversions could be considered more seriously as seemingly mystical events. However, with the author’s continued portrayal of the quest-for-self in both La insolución and Al volver la esquina, the conversion in La mujer nueva is just another hopeful attempt at Eriksonian identity achievement, a struggle that the author herself confronted as she tried to balance her roles as writer, mother and wife during the 50s and 60s, as she endured the eventual demise of her marriage, and then gradually abandoned her public role as writer.

Also important is that Paulina’s conversion on the train does not resolve her identity crisis, but rather it reinforces the firm direction that Blanca, Antonio’s mother, had already given to the protagonist’s search through her religious consultations in Villa de Robre. The mystical event better represents Paulina’s own active decision to relieve her abulia by committing to Catholicism, a choice that she complements through her further efforts to reconcile the Church’s doctrine with the errant actions of herself and those around her. In Madrid, the protagonist’s distance from family gives her the time to resolve these conflicts that both complicate and assist the cultivation of a newly emerging identity.

One of these conflicts is her relationship with Antonio that, despite her conversion, continues to tempt her. She recognizes that Antonio overshadows God’s presence in her life, and she is verbally effective in combating his advances — she even tells him that because she is not a hypocrite, she must shun their relationship — but physically she falters, surrendering to a weekend excursion with him to the beach. Besides the obvious hypocrisy that Paulina reinforces with this trip, it becomes clearer that the protagonist’s religious conversion was neither a definitive, clean ideological epiphany, nor an identity resolution, but rather a simple step in the direction of settling her identity crisis. Paulina’s frequent spiritual consultations with both Fr. González and Blanca as well as her wavering desire to become a Carmelite nun are evidence that her apparent commitment to Catholicism is just a preliminary move she must continue to test in order to verify its appropriateness to her personal circumstances (e.g., marriage, motherhood, extra-marital affair, etc.). Joining Antonio to the coast is part of this deliberation process as it also reflects the protagonist’s re-visiting of prior developmental conflicts in young adulthood and adolescence: the combined struggle of intimacy vs. isolation and identity vs. identity confusion. Initially her commitment to God fulfills her need for intimacy, but a lack of physical, human closeness still perpetuates her feelings of isolation and magnifies the need to associate with Antonio. While sunbathing with her lover on the beach, Paulina confirms
the fleeting, yet desired satisfaction that being with Antonio provides: ‘Quisiera detener el tiempo’ (1245).

Another association that contributes to Paulina’s post-conversion identity-formation is Julián, the delinquent son of the protagonist’s former landlady. Julián’s botched burglary attempt and murder of Paulina’s neighbor — during the protagonist’s beach excursion with Antonio — along with Blanca’s continued spiritual consultations exacerbate Paulina’s identity crisis and force her to re-evaluate her actions in relation to her supposed religious transformation:

¿Qué más daba robar, fornicar, que matar…? Todo obedecía al mismo impulso de egoísmo propio. Aparentemente, algunas cosas resultaban más dañinas a la sociedad que otras […] Y siempre en un espacio de tiempo limitado. A la larga, todas eran igualmente dañinas, aun a la sociedad […] Y delante de Dios, quizás era ella, Paulina, más culpable que aquel imbécil muchacho asesino. (1260)

This view motivates Paulina to reject Antonio, and even with the death of his spouse Rita shortly thereafter — which according to Antonio would allow him and the protagonist to legitimize their bond — Paulina resists her lover, though the temptation to marry him leads her to church to invoke God’s guidance. Witnessing an elderly couple receive the Catholic sacrament of marriage finally convinces Paulina that her identity should be Eulogio’s wife as consecrated by the Church and that she should definitively distance herself from Antonio. To satisfy the protagonist’s Eriksonian, young-adulthood need of intimacy, however, Eulogio must reciprocate, which he does, by responding affirmatively to Paulina’s letter proposing that they marry in the Church. With this letter, the protagonist assumes an assertive role that she has maintained through almost every step of her identity quest; such initiative indeed comments, even if subtly, on female independence in a male-dominated society.

The novel’s conclusion not only re-establishes Paulina’s identity as a mother and wife, but it also reconciles these roles within the protagonist’s newly adopted Catholic faith without the need to become a nun. With Eulogio’s affirmative response to Paulina’s request to legitimize their marriage in the Church, the protagonist regains her family and essentially resolves three crises of Erikson’s psychosocial stages of development: she secures identity from the stage of adolescence, intimacy from young adulthood, and a sense of generativity from adulthood. Paulina’s satisfying feelings of ‘gran confianza’ and ‘paz’ after this definitive transformation reflect the basic strengths of fidelity, love and care that Erikson identifies as core characteristics of adolescence, young adulthood and adulthood respectively (Laforet 1969: 1347).

Although the question of Paulina’s identity seems resolved at the novel’s conclusion, the reader cannot overlook the obvious re-affirmation of conservative Spain’s values that the protagonist’s final circumstances represent, thereby disputing this article’s interpretation that Laforet conveys a subtle message of female independence in an ideologically-oppressive society. However, as the critic Rolón Barada has also observed, following her religious conversion Paulina has actually controlled the course of her own life: ‘Ahora comienza a manejarlo
todo a su manera, por su propia elección, liberada de las expectativas y, en gran medida, de los compromisos sociales’ (Laforet 2003: 13). The reader must recall, for example, that Paulina’s letter to Eulogio dictates the protagonist’s own terms for reuniting, and her husband accepts these conditions, which is an act that verifies her independence and power. Of course, this instance is one of many throughout the novel where Paulina has made her own decisions uninfluenced by society, but determined by her own independent thinking.

While past studies have focused almost exclusively on the spiritual conversion in *La mujer nueva*, this novel also presents an important and accurate portrayal of the special challenges of psychosocial development facing a woman in ultra-conservative Spain, especially during Franco’s dictatorship. However, and as just explained, *La mujer nueva* is not the story of a woman selling out to the oppressive expectations of a conservative, Catholic society, but rather it is the account of an identity pursuit that, in the context of similar searches represented in *Nada, La isla y los demonios, La insolución* and *Al volver la esquina*, reflects the author’s frequently overlooked feminist messages as well as the psychosocial crises that Laforet herself experienced and clearly attempted to resolve with hope in her narrative.

**Works Cited**


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