EXISTENTIAL ENLIGHTENMENT WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF POST-CIVIL WAR SPAIN IN CARMEN LAFORET’S NADA

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ABSTRACT

The following thesis examines postwar Spanish existentialism within the context of Carmen Laforet’s novel *Nada* (1945), which depicts the life of teenage Andrea, who has returned to Barcelona during the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. Postwar Spain refers to the fascist political and social movement led by Francisco Franco from 1939 to 1975, remembered for the fear, repression, control, and poverty it imposed on the Spanish people. Existential themes found in *Nada* demonstrate Andrea’s journey to enlightenment through a series of learning moments, best illuminated by Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialist viewpoint, maintaining that nothingness must be crossed to arrive at enlightenment of existence. My argument is organized as follows: Chapter one introduces the Spanish Civil War, describes existentialism, and discusses popular misperceptions of existential thought. Chapter two explores Andrea’s learning moments through Sartrean existential themes of starvation, abandonment, anguish, death, and enlightenment. Chapter three exhibits Andrea’s journey to existential enlightenment as one mirroring her physical movement, or spatiality. Hardly have literary critics written about *Nada* as fully existentialist; to my knowledge, Laforet’s novel has loosely earned the categorization without an in-depth analysis. In what follows, I show that Andrea, *Nada*’s protagonist, reaches existential enlightenment in the context of postwar Spain through a series of learning moments characterized by Sartrean themes that mirror her physical journeying throughout Barcelona.
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Introduction

At the end of Carmen Laforet’s novel *Nada*, the protagonist claims that “la casa de la calle de Aribau no me llevaba nada” (112). Set in postwar Spain, *Nada* details the life of teenage Andrea, who goes to attend college in Barcelona where she lives with unfamiliar relatives. In Barcelona, Andrea deals with loss and death until she leaves the city after one year, escaping to Madrid. Andrea, in the above quote, insists that she learned nothing from her year in Barcelona. In what follows, I show that Andrea’s misery exhibits a Sartrean trajectory with elements of starvation, abandonment, anguish, death, and enlightenment, and that in a series of learning moments, her spatial journeys throughout Barcelona mimic her inner journey toward existential enlightenment.

Enlightenment refers to self-understanding, the existential state of mind in which the meaning of one’s own existence is clarified and illuminated after overcoming the nothing. Existentialism, the doctrine that existence precedes essence, or that a being exists before its purpose and without any preconception of itself, instigates a pensive, wandering attitude in the individual. In existing literary criticism, Laforet’s novel has hardly been proposed as entirely existentialist; but with pervasive underlying themes of starvation, anguish, abandonment, and death leading to the protagonist Andrea’s enlightenment, I argue that existentialism seamlessly aligns with *Nada*. Critics Michael Thomas and Ruth Sheryl Ostenson, for instance, have argued that *Nada* is only somewhat existentialist and more an example of Bildungsroman, or a journey to maturity. I argue that Andrea’s journey is not one of growth, but of learning to deal with the
nothing in a state of perpetual anguish. Andrea often thinks and acts in dream-like sequences due to lack of nourishment, embodying the nothing that plagues her existence. In this state, she experiences several existential learning moments characterized by starvation, abandonment, anguish, and death resulting in her eventual enlightenment and subsequent freedom, making Sartrean existentialist enlightenment the ideal description of her journey. Freedom, coming after enlightenment, signals the tangible departure of anguish. Thus, Sartrean thought illuminates Andrea’s trajectory to existential enlightenment in Laforet’s *Nada*: She overcomes the nothing and arrives at existential enlightenment and subsequent freedom, as implied in the rest of the quoted line above: “la casa de la calle de Aribau no me llevaba nada…Al menos, así creía yo entonces” (112).
Chapter 1

Introduction to the Spanish Civil War, Establishing Existentialism, and Popular Misconceptions of Existential Thought

The historical context of Nada, life in postwar Spain during the early 1940s, is crucial to understanding Andrea’s journey to existential enlightenment. To bypass Franquist censorship during the time of publication, hardly any explicit political references are made in the novel. Thus, an understanding of the political undertones surrounding Andrea’s time in Barcelona necessitate an awareness of the Spanish Civil War and its aftermath: a lifeless city, missing citizens, and lingering death consume and anguish her.

A Brief History of the Spanish Civil War

The Spanish Civil War, lasting from 1936-1939, may be overlooked in contemporary American history classrooms because of its proximity to the more conspicuous Second World War, beginning in 1939. What started as a planned coup led by Francisco Franco and the Nationalists, a group comprised of political and military right wing conservatives, escalated into a three-year battle pitting the Nationalists against the elected center-left Spanish Republican government, disparagingly referred to as “the Reds,” a name indicating their fear of communist influence. In previous consecutive national elections from 1931 to 1936, Spain had switched back and forth numerous times between political parties, making ideological, economic, and geographical division throughout the country rather evident, as seen in the map of Franco’s conquest, in which the areas last conquered by him were Republican-controlled (Renshaw 21: FIG A, Geographical Split of Nationalists [yellowish areas] versus Republicans [reddish areas, last to be conquered by Franco], Google Images). Nationalists generally consisted of wealthier
landowning individuals whereas Republicans, supported by the international Marxist movement, consisted of urban classes, landless peasants, and much of the educated middle class. Catalonia was one of the last areas under Republican control when in 1939 it was seized by Franco. With its separate language, culture, and autonomous government, Catalonia was the antithesis to what Franco desired: a united Spain. Banning native tongues and other barriers to unity, Franco instated a Catholic, highly authoritarian regime and garnered continued support from the Nationalists.

FIG A. General map of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939).
Additionally, support for the Fascist cause was found in likeminded regimes, namely Germany, Italy, and Portugal, and Spanish conservatives, businesses in the US, and the Catholic Church. Regarding US businesses, historian Paul Preston has discovered that “The pro-Nazi president of Texaco oil company, Thorkild Rieber, for instance, risked six million dollars by supplying the fascist Nationalists with a substantial proportion of their oil needs on credit.” This claim substantiates the broader declaration that the US government and capitalists took part in the bolstering of anti-communist regimes abroad, seen in US propaganda favoring fascist regimes during the Francoist years. US propagandists helped to reinforce the image of Franco’s anti-communist regime by referring to postwar Spain as “part of the free world” (“The Spanish Civil War: A new book by Paul Preston”). On March 31, 1939, Franco and his supporters won control of Spain as a whole, and with the support of big business, the Catholic Church, and world fascism, Franquismo, synonymous with repression, fear, and death, endured until 1975. Layla Renshaw, in “Exhuming Loss: Memory, Materiality, and Mass Graves of the Spanish Civil War,” describes the traumatic Francoist past that continues to haunt Spain today, with its “thousands of extrajudicial political killings of civilians” that characterized the war, taking the form of mass graves or simply paseos—illegal abductions and executions (17, 22). Even though the transition to Spanish democracy in 1975 signaled an end to the disturbing past of bloody war and harrowing dictatorship, aftershock and despair still remain as new leadership has searched for unknown grave sites and worked to rebuild Spain.

**Development of the European Existentialist Movement**

The Spanish Civil War was an eruption of clashing political ideologies also experienced by other European countries during the twentieth century. French perceptions of the Spanish Civil War helped generate French political undercurrents and intellectual ideologies during the same time. Interestingly, France, which like Spain experienced strong opposition between political left
and right, was heavily influenced by intellectual movements such as Existentialism, Marxism, and Post-Structuralism. Deeming the political situation in France an “undeclared Civil War” between left and right, Martin Hurcombe in “France and the Spanish Civil War” illuminates the importance of the Spanish Civil War to France and to all of Europe pre-World War II. He notes that an attempted French Civil War, following the Spanish example, failed in 1936 before the successful opposition between French left and right in the French Civil War of 1940-1945 (5). Spanish influence on France did not end with the French Civil War; events of the Spanish Civil War also inspired French intellectual movements.

Jean-Paul Sartre, a French soldier and philosopher commonly considered the father of the existentialist movement, published *The Wall* in 1939, which takes place during the Spanish Civil War. The book, widely considered one of his greatest existential works, depicts Spanish prisoners condemned to death, with ‘the wall’ referring to the place of execution that Franco and the Nationalists would line prisoners up against before shooting. Existentialist theory applied to the book might indicate that the wall symbolizes the fact that death is inescapable; Existentialism, the idea that existence precedes essence, posits that man must experience the nothing, a bewilderment at the meaninglessness of existence, before moving on to an anguished state at the responsibility for creating one’s own meaning. This existential trajectory illuminates paths to enlightenment like Andrea’s in *Nada*. Although accurate depictions of existentialism appear in books like Laforet’s *Nada* and Sartre’s *The Wall*, common news media at the time popularized a different form of Sartre’s thinking.

**Popular Existentialism in the Twentieth Century**

Defining existentialism’s role in the twentieth century helps to distinguish popular pessimistic misperceptions of the theory from the real optimism supposed to be associated with it. Existentialism, explained above as the individual’s conundrum of existence in a meaningless
world, pervaded pop culture worldwide from the 1940s through the 1980s. Portrayals range from thought-provoking, unique films to American satires of the philosophy in widely circulated news media. Popularly, existentialism in America was as much about the famous thinker as the content of the ideas: Sartre and other existentialists were depicted as “exemplary of ‘an erratic left-bank bohemianism,’ an image that fit poorly with postwar celebrations of the American intellectual as a sober-minded, optimistic, respectable citizen” (Cotkin 328). Though French ideas, art, and fashion were highly sought after by the American public and the French label of existentialism initially helped to popularize the philosophy, American propaganda overly glamorized it, making it more of a fad and less of an intellectual movement with “early coverage in magazines such as Vogue and Harper’s Bazaar, and…in middlebrow publications such as Time, Newsweek, and the New Yorker” (329-332). After media attention from 1946-47, existentialism was popularly conceived of as “a French philosophy of bleak despair, marked with abstract concepts and big words,” a feeling that *Time* captured in a 1946 satire, reporting “that the existentialists were now being referred to in Paris as the ‘excrementalists’” (338). Popular misconceptions of existentialist theory were just as common in film with its influence on styles such as 1940s Film Noir, containing existentialist themes of abandonment, anxiety, and death. The French coined the term ‘Film Noir,’ referring to pessimistic American murder mystery films of 1944-54 (FIG B: Cover of *Film Noir: The Encyclopedia*, Google Images). Fabricated in America and elsewhere, perceptions of a pessimistic existentialism tainted the framework of the theory to be fashionably depressing instead of optimistically illuminating.

Sartre himself expressed discontent with the popularization of existentialism as a pessimistic doctrine due to the simplification and misunderstanding of existentialist ideas in the mainstream. He defends his outlook as optimistic: “the destiny of man is placed within himself” (9). Some films such as Luis Buñuel’s 1961 stimulating Spanish picture *Viridiana* did a remarkable job of using properly optimistic existentialism to cater to the popular audience. Full of
religious symbolism, *Viridiana* aligns with Sartre’s atheist existentialism: the anguished protagonist realizes that nothing exists, recognizing and embracing self-understanding through a series of learning moments. The film won the Palme d’Or at the 1961 Cannes Film Festival, even though it was banned under Francoist censorship in Spain. Understanding existentialism as an optimistic philosophy as it appears in *Viridiana* necessitates Sartre’s work in qualifying its same presence in Laforet’s *Nada*.
Chapter 2

Sartrean Existential Themes in Nada: Starvation, Abandonment, Anguish, Death, and Enlightenment

Existential thought, as “a new basis for…interpretation of the exterior world,” helped Spanish people define the emotional implications of the postwar years under Franquismo (Palley 24). In evaluating Nada as an existentialist novel, political undertones cannot be overlooked. The context of postwar Spain helps us understand both Andrea’s plight with the meaninglessness of the nothing and her anguish due to broken and tumultuous relationships: Barcelona in ruins and Andrea’s relatives in turmoil stimulate her existential bewilderment and allow her to experience every aspect of her journey to enlightenment. Sartre’s brand of existentialism particularly helps to emphasize Andrea’s experiences with starvation, anguish, abandonment, death, and enlightenment. Surrounding every one of Andrea’s learning moments, these themes lead her through the nothing toward existential enlightenment and subsequently to freedom.

Summary of Nada

Before I continue relating Laforet’s Nada to themes in existential Sartrean thought, I will provide a brief summary of the novel’s events for ease in following my argument: Eighteen-year-old Andrea moves to Barcelona to attend university, where she lives with relatives she has not seen for years. As soon as she arrives, her hopes of an exciting new life are crushed as a desolate, miserable city and equally gloomy house greet her. Controlling relatives add to her wretched experience: her grandmother, Aunt Angustias, Uncle Juan, Uncle Román, and Aunt Gloria contribute to the atmosphere of the dysfunctional household torn by postwar poverty and starvation. Angustias, a strict, controlling, and prying woman, is the source of much of Andrea’s
frustration and anxiety. When Angustias moves away to a convent not long after Andrea’s arrival, Andrea’s life in the House on Aribau becomes significantly less traumatic. However, Andrea still experiences issues with her family: Andrea’s family problems serve as a metaphor for ongoing postwar disorder in Catalan life (Wells 1123). At school, visibly destitute Andrea becomes quick best friends with wealthy Ena, who rescues Andrea from social embarrassment. In fact, some scholars point out that Andrea’s love for Ena exhibits lesbian overtones: “Andrea’s obsession for Ena is so strong that it may even suggest a homosexual desire” (Perret 341). When Ena terminates the friendship without explanation, Andrea is left confused, alone, and helpless. Andrea and Ena eventually reconcile their strong friendship soon after Andrea discovers the affair between Ena and her uncle Román. Ena admits her initial reason for befriending Andrea, intrigued by Andrea’s absentminded appearance: “Tenías los ojos brillantes y andabas torpe, abstraida, sin fijarte en nada…yo, secretamente, deseaba conocerte,” (62) insinuating she finds a similar fascination with Andrea’s Uncle Román. Román is the source of constant silent fear permeating the house on Aribau: “tenía un cargo importante con los rojos…era un espía” (18). If discovered, he would face death by Franco’s regime for his previous betrayals to the Nationalist party. This fear remains largely unaddressed throughout the entire novel, even through Román’s suicide. The evasion of explicitly depicting Francoist oppression or politics (there exists a constant undercurrent throughout the novel) stems from avoiding Franco’s censorship during the book’s time of publication. As I will demonstrate, the aftermath of Román’s suicide sparks Andrea’s revelation of the existence of the nothing and brings her enlightenment full-circle. Death is a main avenue to achieving existential enlightenment, and with Román’s being near the end of the novel, his serves as the culmination of Andrea’s existential journey. Directly after reaching enlightenment, Ena’s family invites Andrea to move to Madrid, symbolizing her existential freedom.
On Existential Themes and Maturity in Nada

Because Nada encapsulates strong postwar oppression that must be felt rather than read, some scholars maintain that the novel more simply depicts Andrea’s journey to maturity as she experiences the postwar trauma firsthand. Michael Thomas claims that the label of existencialismo is only a partially accurate classification: “if we consider Nada’s total structure, we find that it is not completely centered around a growing disenchantment with existence,” making the argument that Andrea’s journey is actually an outlook on the existential implications of maturity: “Nada is, in fact, an affirmation of life and not a denial of it” (57, 58). This directly supports Sartrean existentialist thought, positing that man optimistically controls his own destiny. Although Andrea is confronted with a death that ultimately brings her to enlightenment, the affirmation of life plays a crucial role in her journey: “yo empecé a sentir la presencia de la muerte en la casa cuando casi había pasado dos meses de aquella tragedia. Al pronto la vida me había parecido completamente igual” (109). Andrea’s confrontation with death and affirmation for life simultaneously move her toward an enlightened existence. As Thomas’ reasoning demonstrates, Andrea’s journey to maturity can be easily confused with her existential journey to enlightenment. Unsurprisingly, maturity should accompany existential enlightenment, as Heidegger describes: “Achieving maturity is both a self-actualization and a self-revelation of Being” (Boelen 113). Maturity, then, coincides with existential enlightenment as Andrea grows in learning moments ridden with starvation, abandonment, anguish, and death throughout her year in Barcelona.

Nausea Revealing the Presence of the Nothing in Nada

Andrea’s journey to existential enlightenment begins with the nothing. It is important to understand the nothing not as a linear path, but instead as a journey of learning moments, of ups and downs. When Andrea leaves Barcelona, she has attained both freedom, “aquella partida me
emocionaba como una liberación,” and self-understanding, “una viva emoción…Me marchaba ahora sin haber conocido nada de lo que confusamente esperaba: la vida en su plenitud, la alegría, el interés profundo, el amor…no me llevaba nada. Al menos, así creía yo entonces” (112). The nothing illuminates Andrea’s path to freedom and enlightenment, where her awareness of the nothing is most explicitly demonstrated by her initial sensation of nausea. In fact, Sartre’s most famous fictional depiction of his existentialist thought came with his first novel, Nausea, published in 1938 and considered one of the best examples of his existentialism. The book follows protagonist Antoine Roquentin, who determines that nausea is existence revealing itself in the most unpleasant form possible (Sheehan 5). Roquentin writes a thesis about an adventurer and during his research is overcome by a certain apathy. He becomes obsessed with insignificant details about the outside world, losing interest in his work and turning to the question of existence. Like Roquentin, Andrea similarly suffers from nausea as a result of the broader implications of individual existence, felt in the miserable house on Aribau within the context of dreary postwar Spain:

¡Cuántos días inútiles! Días llenos de historias, demasiadas historias turbias. Historias incompletas, apenas iniciadas e hinchadas ya como una vieja madera a la intemperie. Historias demasiado oscuras para mí. Su olor, que era el podrido olor de mi casa, me causaba cierta nausea. (17)

With the connotations surrounding “certain nausea,” Andrea implies that her nausea is induced by more than just the smell of the house on Aribau, but is one brought on by her pensive state. Like Roquentin, it entirely consumes her:

…habían llegado a constituir el único interés de mi vida. Poco a poco me había ido quedando ante mis propios ojos en un segundo plano de la realidad, abiertos mis sentidos solo para la vida que bullía en el piso de la calle de Aribau. Me acostumbraba a olvidarme de mi aspecto y de mis sueños. (17)
Quickly, as Roquentin does, she grasps the triviality of physical properties and is confronted by existence, overcome with sadness: “Iba dejando de tener importancia el olor de los meses, las visiones del porvenir y se iba agigantando cada gesto de Gloria, cada reticencia de Román. El resultado parecía ser aquella inesperada tristeza” (17). For both Roquentin and Andrea, nausea brought on by this sadness refers to the overwhelming effects from contemplating the existence of the outside world. Like Roquentin, Andrea loses sight of time, “yo empecé a perder el sentido del tiempo. Horas o días resultaban lo mismo. Días o noches parecían iguales” (105). Finally, like Andrea, Roquentin experiences the revelation that the purpose to existence is tied to “nothingness,” defined as “not merely the opposite idea to things; instead…it is why things can be meaningful at all” (Sheehan 15). As previously mentioned, Andrea must cross the nothing to reach self-understanding and earn her freedom: Sartre’s existentialist contemporary, Martin Heidegger, points out that without the nothing, there is “no selfhood and no freedom” (Sheehan 15). Thus, Andrea’s nausea confirms the existence of the nothing that she must overcome as part of her journey to existential enlightenment.

**Sartrean Existential Themes in Nada**

Andrea reaches existential enlightenment through a series of learning moments in starvation, abandonment, anguish, and death. These learning moments are largely inspired by Andrea’s experiences living in postwar Spain: Spying and manipulation in the House on Aribau act as direct commentary on the paranoia, idleness, and hunger surrounding the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War. The most obvious characteristic of Franquismo in Laforet’s novel is the oppressive poverty Andrea stumbles upon when she enters Barcelona and, subsequently, the House on Aribau:

El hedor que se advertía en toda la casa llegó en una ráfaga más fuerte. Era un olor a porquería de gato. Sentí que me ahogaba y trepé en peligroso alpinismo
sobre el respaldo de un sillón para abrir una puerta que aparecía entre cortinas de terciopelo y polvo. (8)

Her peers at university are all wealthier than she is and made fun of her before her friendship with Ena: “Nos reíamos de ti” (62). Andrea’s social embarrassment at her economic status, despite learning to live with it, characterizes her impecunious existence in postwar Barcelona.

Andrea and her relatives live in utter poverty, not uncharacteristic of postwar Spain. Set in “los años de hambre,” the theme of starvation in Nada insinuates a larger need in postwar Barcelona. Starvation, a double entendre, represents physical hunger at the surface level, and on a deeper level it implies a hunger for postwar political change under Franco’s repression, characterized by its continual trepidation and economic hardship. Government-controlled food and housing shortages, as part of “the Francoist rhetorical reconstruction of ‘New Spain’…forbade the mention of certain aspects of daily life such as food and housing shortages” (Perret 335). Because of her food shortage, Andrea oftentimes thinks and acts in dream-like sequences: “Todo el día había transcurrido como un sueño” (17) and “sino a la vision desenfocada de mis nervios demasiado afiliados por un hambre que a fuerza de ser crónica llegué casi a no sentirla” (52). In fact, Andrea’s dreadful starvation causes her to embody the existential nothing that plagues her existence: She becomes the physical representation of her own existential journey. Her meager allowance barely covers student expenses, but she spends her money on irrational luxuries, such as chocolates and flowers, as gifts: “Cuando recibía mi mensualidad iba a casa de Ena cargada de flores, compraba dulces a mi abuela y también me acostumbré a comprar cigarillos” (52). Andrea’s spending habits combined with her family’s poverty result in her startlingly skinny physical appearance: “estás delgada, Andrea” (94). Ena tells Andrea that she suffers from hysteria due to malnutrition: “Tú comes demasiado poco, Andrea, y estás histérica” also addressing the starvation and subsequent hysteria that plagues
postwar Barcelona: “Hay quien se ha vuelto loco de hambre” (95). Andrea herself recognizes her hysterics due to lack of nourishment: “me ocurría pensar que estaba histérica por la falta de alimento” (52). The amount of times hunger is addressed in the novel does not justify its magnitude: “hunger exists in the background…whether it is explicitly mentioned or not” (Perret, 340). Additionally, hunger highlights economic discrepancies in the postwar period: Andrea starves, so Ena’s family consistently invites her for dinner. As a hidden jab at the Francoist regime and as a contributing force to Andrea’s anguished state, Perret calls hunger “the ‘nothing’ that does things” (344). Starvation, an attribute of Andrea’s anguish and part of the nothing that she herself embodies, perpetuates the anguished state that leads Andrea toward existential enlightenment.

Like starvation, abandonment also enables Andrea’s anguished state. Abandonment is what it means to decide our own being (Sartre 7). There are several moments throughout the novel that depict Andrea’s atheistic tendencies; She first recognizes abandonment in the inexistence of God when she first explores Barcelona’s cathedral soon after Angustias’ departure. She makes no mention of God, only describing her admiration for the physical façade and structure of the building: “paz, una imponente claridad, se derrumba de la arquitectura maravillosa” (44). She later makes a similar observation while visiting the church of Santa María del Mar: “apareció a mis ojos adornada de un singular encanto, con sus peculiares torres y su pequeña plaza, amazacotada de casas viejas enfrente” (58). Her deliberate elimination of thoughts regarding God’s presence signifies her atheistic tendencies, demonstrating her existentialist realization of abandonment. Sartre elaborates on this abandonment due to God’s inexistence as the realization that destiny is in man’s own hands and, frighteningly, humanity has no values to legitimize its actions: “We are left alone, without excuse,” and this is what it means that “man is condemned to be free” (5). Thus, the realization that man creates his own destiny, brought about by abandonment, makes existential freedom possible.
Andrea experiences a more physical aspect of abandonment with Ena’s betrayal. Sartre describes man’s destiny as the realization that “The other is indispensable” as “a freedom which confronts [his],” suggesting the importance of relationships in attaining and understanding freedom (Sartre 9). After being abandoned by Ena, Andrea comes to know herself independently, befriend new classmates at school that recognize her newfound abandonment and ensuing aloneness, “¿Ya no eres amiga de Ena?” (57). She feels even more out of place with her new friends than she did with Ena, “Me sentí en un momento angustiada por la pobreza de me ataví” (84) describing her aloneness in a room full of people she did not know: “una hora, dos, quizás, estuve sola” and eventually fleeing, finding herself “en la soledad” (86). After spending plenty of time alone, Andrea appreciates the importance of her relationship with Ena, speaking of her affectionately: “me reblandecí el recuerdo de Ena, tanto cariña me inspiraba…Ella, tan querida y radiante, me admiraba y me estimaba a mí” (95). Andrea realizes the importance of relationships during her time of abandonment. Her awareness implicates inevitable existential freedom: “in projecting and losing himself beyond himself…that he himself, thus abandoned, must decide for himself…always seeking…an aim which is one of liberation” (Sartre 13). Abandonment implies the need for the other, leading to existential freedom in that one determines the other’s importance to his own existence, resulting in anguish and then self-understanding, allowing freedom. Andrea recognizes freedom in Ena, and in fact, Ena is Andrea’s escape to freedom at the end of the novel. Thus, abandonment allows Andrea to clearly distinguish her sense of self from her sense of the other, enabling anguish.

Facilitated by starvation and abandonment, Andrea’s anguished state is characterized by postwar destitution and vindictive family relationships. Sartre defines anguish as “a condition of action itself” in which one realizes responsibility, resulting in apprehension. In other words, anguish results from the realization that man “is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind,” equating the feeling for some
with “anxiety” (Sartre 4). That is, existentialism “puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders,” resulting in anguish at the bewildering nature of the task (3–4). With a name that directly translates to anguish, Andrea’s Aunt Angustias precisely represents the emotion, making her character almost interchangeable with it. Angustias’ physical appearance serves as a tangible portrayal of anguish: “va a ser difícil olvidar el aspecto de Angustias…Con los mechones grises despeinados, los ojos tan abiertos que me daban miedo y limpiándose con dos dedos un hilillo de sangre de la comisura de los labios” (28). Anguish represses, frustrates, and bewilders Andrea, seen in her interactions with Angustias:

…me parecía que estaba atormentada conmigo…Cuando me veía reir o interesarme en la conversación de cualquier otro personaje de la casa, se volvía humilde…Se sentaba a mi lado y apoyaba a la fuerza de mi cabeza contra su pecho…le parecía yo triste o asustada, se ponía muy contenta y se volvía autoritaria.” (13)

Andrea is not the only one full of trepidation by her aunt; the household is nervous the day of Angustias’ departure to the convent: “Nos tropezábamos por la casa poseídos de nerviosisimo” (41). But after Angustias leaves, Andrea describes her sense of freedom from authority: “me sentía suelta y libre” (43) although anguish will still form a large part of her journey to existential enlightenment. Andrea’s brief feeling of freedom confirms the presence of the anguish that continually haunts her existence. This existential anguish, also felt as anxiety and fearfulness, drives Andrea through her learning moments toward enlightenment.

Andrea’s own anguish helps her to be more perceptive to the anguish of others, especially as she nears enlightenment. After Ena abandons her, Andrea speaks to Ena’s anguished mother, Margarita, upset with Ena’s evasiveness due to her recent involvement with Román: “me miró de tal manera que sólo recogí un estremecimiento de angustia” (87). Later, when she catches Ena
coming from Román’s room, Andrea’s own anguish returns and overwhelms her, quite visibly, as Ena asks “¿por qué eres tan trágica, querida?” and Andrea, having evolved through her existential journey thus far, is able to place and describe her infuriating reaction: “mi furia se me agolpó en una angustia que me hizo volver la cabeza y echar a correr escaleras abajo, casi matándome, cegada por las lágrimas” (97). Anguish, for the most part, consumes Andrea until the end of the novel, when “Entré en el cuarto de Angustias por última vez. Hacía calor y la ventana estaba abierta; el conocido reflejo del farol de la calle se extendía sobre los baldosines en tristes riadas amarillentas” (111). In one of her final learning moments, and arguably the most crucial of the entire novel, Andrea realizes that a collected calm replaced the familiar repressive, controlling anguish as she observes Angustias’ room for the last time, and from Angustias’ window, notes the sad yellow light flooding the streets. In this scene, Andrea quite literally is confronted with an optimistic yellow light, synonymous with having reached existential enlightenment. Thus, this pivotal change in Andrea’s emotional state in which she displays the ability to express her feelings, implying that anguish has truly left her, signifies the occurrence of existential enlightenment.

Before Andrea reaches the pivotal point of existential enlightenment, she experiences existential death, which like starvation is an important yet largely unaddressed theme throughout the novel. In the postwar period, Franco’s mass killings threatened many, especially those opposed to the Nationalists during the Civil War. Andrea does not directly confront death until Román’s suicide, which occurs after Andrea discovers his affair with Ena. After learning of the affair, Andrea experiences a crucial learning moment that expresses her movement toward enlightenment:

Yo tuve que sonreírme. En pocos días la vida se me aparecía distinta a como la había conocido hasta guardados son quizá los que todos los de nuestro alrededor
conocen. Tragedias estúpidas. Lágrimas inútiles. Así empezaba a aparecerme la vida entonces. (100)

Others note her changed state as well: “antes no le preguntabas nada a nadie, Andrea…Ahora te has vuelta más buena” (103). Then, after learning of Román’s suicide, Andrea experiences an anguish-filled detour from her existential path to enlightenment, but is still able to coherently communicate her thoughts and feelings: “A cada escalón me subía una nueva oleada de angustioso miedo y de repugnancia” (104). Andrea’s new found ability to identify and describe her emotions signifies a move away from the nothing and toward existential freedom.

Existential freedom follows Andrea’s enlightenment, triggered by Román’s death. Sartre recognizes that freedom can only be attained by man “find[ing] himself again and [understanding] that nothing can save himself from himself” (13). In Andrea’s case, crossing the nothing and arriving at an anguish-free, enlightened existence comes with experiencing death. A bewildered Andrea ponders the death of Román, unable to process the tragedy, equating it to ‘nothing’ because death threatens her, too, due to her malnutrition. Looking in the mirror, she recounts:

…me encontré reflejada, miserablemente flaca y con los dientes chocándome como si me muriera de frío. La verdad es que era todo tan espantoso que rebasaba mi capacidad de tragedia…Un día en que no hubiese sucedido nada. Ya lo creo que estoy histérica, pensaba…Arriba estaba Román tendido, sangriento, con la cara partida por el rictus de los que mueren condenados…sentía que no me iba a mover nunca de allí. Parecía idiotizada. (104)

Andrea describes her utter shock at and inability to process the gravity of Román’s unfortunate death. On one of her walks taken after Román’s death, Andrea visits the cathedral and feels “como si estuviese oliendo un aroma de muerte y me pareciera bueno por primera vez, después de haberme causado terror…no tenía la cabeza buena aquel día…Llegué a casa de la
calle de Aribau medio loca.” She describes her “crazy” state, as if she were able to smell death. Despite the tremendous sadness of the situation, Andrea’s ability to describe her reaction implies that she nears existential enlightenment. Later, she admits that “no llegué a creer verdaderamente en el hecho físico de la muerte de Román hasta mucho tiempo después,” feeling “una nostalgia de Román, un deseo de su presencia, que no había sentido nunca cuando él vivía” (108). She feels nostalgic for her uncle, even though she never liked him while he was living, and admits that she could not process the painful misfortune of his death until much later. After realizing the absence of her anguish as she stood in Angustias’ room for the last time, overcoming the presence of the nothing while processing Román’s death, Andrea is offered real freedom when Ena’s family invites her to live in Madrid with them, which would “cambiar el rumbo de mi vida” (110). Andrea is now perceptive, happy, and free: “me emocionaba como una liberación,” (111) following with her newly attained enlightenment. The seeming triviality of Andrea’s declaration that she feels free does not implicate the magnitude of her existential freedom; accompanying her existential freedom is a spatial freedom that allows her to leave the place associated with her starvation, abandonment, anguish, and death. Freedom for Andrea not only just follows existential enlightenment and her escape from abandonment and anguish, but it also represents physically and metaphorically leaving her miserable life on Aribau. Death, then, serves as the last stage of Andrea’s journey to enlightenment and subsequent freedom, allowing her to experience the nothing in its most real form, battle anguish one last time, and come to know freedom.
Chapter 3

Spatial and Existential Aspects of Journeying

Andrea’s physical journeys throughout Barcelona substantiate her existential journey through starvation, abandonment, anguish, and death, offering a symbolic vision of the nothing that embodies and plagues her. Every journey that Andrea embarks on, ridden with Sartrean existential themes, coincides with a learning moment fundamental to her enlightenment and subsequent freedom.

Existential Enlightenment through Spatial Movement

For Andrea, Barcelona’s streets provide the perfect landscape conducive to forgetting her thoughts. Her frequent wandering throughout Barcelona demonstrates her existential bewilderment at the meaninglessness of the world around her. Andrea seems “more an absence than a presence” (Wells 1126) to the point where she embodies the nothingness that engulfs her. Andrea’s spatial journeys throughout Barcelona coincide with learning moments that guide her existential journey to enlightenment. These journeys, primarily driven by anguish, cause Andrea’s retreat into a quiet, pensive existence as she becomes overwhelmed by the destructiveness of humanity evidenced by the ruins of Barcelona.

For a girl whose entire life is made up of incessant journeys, it follows that Andrea arrives at enlightenment through the same medium. After being orphaned by her parents and going back and forth between a convent and living in a small village with her cousin, Andrea finds herself in Barcelona again. Andrea oftentimes only mentions her many journeys but does not elaborate on most of them, for instance, when she leaves Pons’ party after feeling humiliated
at her dirty appearance to wander the streets, she quickly references: “Estaba caminando como si recorriera el propio camino de mi vida, desierto. Mirando las sombras de las gentes que a mi lado se escapaban sin poder asirlas…irremediablemente, en la soledad” (86). Movement serves as her guide through all-consuming abandonment and anguish, helps her conclude that nothing exists, and allows her to reach a state of total enlightenment by the time she moves to Madrid at the end of the novel. I analyze six separate journeys, or learning moments, that lead Andrea through the nothing, each bringing her closer to existential enlightenment.

The first journey that leads Andrea one step closer to enlightenment occurs when Andrea feels liberated from authority due to Aunt Angustias’ departure. Andrea leaves Ena’s house, feeling “aturdida, con la impresión de debía de ser muy tarde” but is now unhurried, feeling a fleeting lapse in anguish, noticing that “todos los portales estaban cerrados y el cielo se descargaba en una apretada lluvia de estrellas sobre las azoteas” (43). On a whim, she decides to explore Barcelona’s Cathedral. This moment of brief, fearless suspension that Andrea feels from anguish reveals the presence of anguish itself: “Por primera vez me sentía suelta y libre en la ciudad, sin miedo al fantasma del tiempo” (43). She describes her heightened interest in the same street she had walked down hundreds of times:

…vía Layetana, con su suave declive desde la plaza de Urquinaona, donde el cielo se deslustraba con el color rojo de la luz artificial, hasta el gran edificio de Correos y el puerto, bañados en sombras, argentados por la luz estelar sobre las llamas blancas de los faroles, aumentaba mi perplejidad. (43)

Here, she juxtaposes anguish and hope in her description of via Layetana: red artificial lighting enhances the postwar undertone while shadows enhance the anguished tone of the novel, but starlight and white streetlamps, as symbols of illuminated positivity, represent a learning moment. Here, Andrea nonetheless demonstrates her inability to escape the nothing: Soon after arriving at the Cathedral, Andrea’s newfound hope and fearlessness are quickly overcome by
familiar dismal isolation and anguish as she notices “una soledad impresionante, como si todos los habitantes de la ciudad hubiesen muerto” (44). Her physical surroundings further personify the eeriness, “Algún quejido del aire en las puertas palpitaba allí. Nada más” (44). Andrea’s use of the word “nada” here signals that her anguished state has begun to illuminate the existence of the nothing.

Andrea’s more telling learning moments occur during her several beach excursions with Ena and Ena’s boyfriend, Jaime. Typically offering a relaxing escape from reality, the beach should offer happy memories. For Andrea, there are glimpses of that: “Ena y yo corríamos descalzas por la orilla del agua, que estaba helada, y gritábamos al sentirla rozarnos” but Andrea’s abandonment clouds her memory. Her exclusion from the couple’s love taints her memories of her weekends away as she recalls details of their time together ridden with isolation: “estaba tumbada en la arena, junto a Jaime, y los dos veíamos su figura graciosa recortada contra el Mediterráneo, cabrilleante y azul. Vino hacia nosotros luego, riéndose, y Jaime la besó. La vi apoyada contra él” (51). She continues, implying that her exclusion is practically her only memory of their weekends away: “Yo, detrás, me ponía de rodillas, vuelta de espaldas en el asiento, para ver la masa informe y portentosa que era Barcelona” (52). Because of Andrea’s exclusion from Jaime and Ena’s affair, her vacation memories are overcast by isolation as she decides how her memories are or are not meaningful, illuminating her pensive state of existential anguish.

Andrea’s anguished state worsens during her falling out with Ena, as she is left abandoned by her best friend without explanation. Hurting from abandonment, she exhibits a series of uncharacteristic decisions. Andrea one day meets up with Gerardo from the Cathedral, who turns out to be harsh and condescending in his actions, “como si yo fuera un perro” (53). He takes her on a long walk and attempts to kiss her. Andrea rejects the act and compares his attempt to “el día que una buena monja de mi colegio…me explicó que había dejado de ser una niña, que
me había convertido en mujer” (54). Andrea recognizes that in this learning moment she has acknowledged Gerardo’s crass demeanor and recognized what love is not, rejecting it. With a hint of irony, she continues: “De modo que este hombre estúpido es quien me ha besado por primera vez... Es muy posible que esto tampoco tenga importancia” (54). She determines that Gerardo’s kiss is unimportant to her life, finding the deciphering power to sift through the ambiguity associated with the nothing to distinguish the important from the unimportant. Evaluating the importance of life events like this signifies her increasing preparedness to experience existential enlightenment.

Andrea continues her progression toward existential enlightenment as she deals with repeated family conflict in the house on Aribau, where her anguished state continues to spark learning moments. One night, Andrea chases Juan through the streets of Barcelona after being prompted by Gloria to follow him because of his agitation:

…no pensé ni un momento adonde podría conducirme esta aventura, ni tampoco en qué iba a hacer para calmar a un hombre cuyos furiosos arrebatos conocía tan bien…mis pensamientos temblaban en la misma excitación que me oprimía la garganta hasta casi sentir dolor. (66)

She thinks about comforting him in his distress, “Éste es el momento —pensé— de poner mi mano sobre su brazo...No hice nada” (67). Andrea illustrates a noticeable change in character as she ponders whether or not to reassure her uncle. Ultimately, abandonment and anguish hold her back. She second-guesses her instinct to nurture because of the lack of a nurturing family role model in her life, namely Aunt Angustias, who constantly controlled and upset her. Until confronted with Juan’s despair, Andrea had suppressed the nurturing part of her disposition. Andrea ultimately comforts her uncle instead of reprimanding him, taking “un pañuelo del bolsillo para que se limpiara la sangre que le goteaba sobre el ojo” (68). In this learning moment,
Andrea embraces her new role as caretaker, diminishing the ambiguity of existential abandonment and anguish.

As the novel advances, Andrea’s journeys throughout the city increasingly diminish the ambiguity of existential themes. One of Andrea’s more crucial journeys occurs after finding out about Ena’s affair with Román. Feeling abandoned by Ena for having terminated their friendship for the affair, Andrea welcomes isolation: “llegué a la calle, hostigada por la incontenible explosión de pena que me hacía correr, aislándome de todo” (97). As Andrea embraces solitude, she feels bewildered by the world around her, experiencing the nothing that leads her closer to enlightenment. The explicit declaration of Ena and Román’s affair, along with the realization that perhaps Andrea could not compete in filling the void that Román’s love could provide, causes Andrea to turn to the city streets burdened by anguish and abandonment. Immediately, “me reblandecía el recuerdo de Ena, tanto cariño me inspiraba” (95). She genuinely misses her friend, who once accepted and inspired her. In this scene, pathetic fallacy illuminates Andrea’s gray, unpredictable, and seemingly incomprehensible emotions: “venía del mar un soplo gris y ardiente. Oí decir a alguien que era tiempo de tormenta” (95). Most notably, Andrea confides that she repeatedly feels a longing in her life, “Este anhelo repetido siempre en mi vida que, con cualquier motivo, sentía brotar” (96). Andrea recognizes that she yearns for something, demonstrating her own existential realization that her anguish signals the coming of existential enlightenment.

This yearning materializes soon after Andrea’s final journey, which sparks her enlightenment and freedom. As mentioned in chapter two, Andrea has difficulty accepting Román’s death, so takes many walks to ease her mind. Román’s suicide illuminates Andrea’s increasingly clarifying ability to recognize and define her own feelings:

Corría por la ciudad debilitándome inútilmente…Corría instintivamente, con el pudor de mi atavío demasiado miserable, huyendo de los barrios lujosos y bien
Andrea runs not from her thoughts about Román, but from what remains at the house on Aribau: broken relationships and gloomy memories. Not only is Andrea breaking physically free when she leaves the house on Aribau, but she also provides herself emotional therapy during her exploration, a crucial step in realizing her arrival at enlightenment. This final culmination in which Andrea’s physical and emotional journeys coincide signifies her preparedness for the change that will bring her to freedom: leaving Barcelona. Andrea recognizes, in retrospect, that her move to Madrid was a life-changing event. In her spatial movement following Román’s suicide, Andrea prepares herself for the moment of enlightenment that she experiences right before leaving for Madrid while standing in Angustias’ room.

The extent to which Andrea’s spatial journeys align with her inner journey toward enlightenment reveal Laforet’s deliberate use of postwar Barcelona as the backdrop to her existential work which demonstrates how the trajectory of starvation, abandonment, anguish, and death lead to enlightenment. Hopelessness and inequality in the war-torn city suffuse Andrea’s explorations, shaping each existential learning moment, each one leading Andrea closer to achieving enlightenment and subsequent freedom.
Chapter 4

Conclusion and Recommendations

Carmen Laforet’s *Nada* was instrumental in developing a new style of literature in postwar Spain, encouraging other writers at the time to bypass Francoist censorship and write novels that creatively disguised the depression, poverty, and starvation that characterized their contemporary society. With *Nada*’s pervasive underlying themes of starvation, anguish, abandonment, and death leading to the protagonist’s enlightenment, Laforet’s novel was unique among existing fiction with its existentialist themes explaining and illuminating events within the context of repressive *Franquismo*. I have demonstrated that Andrea’s misery living in postwar Spain coincides with Sartrean existential themes through a trajectory of starvation, abandonment, anguish, and death, and that by a series of learning moments mimicking her inner journey thorough the nothing, Andrea arrives at existential enlightenment.

Not only does Andrea herself embody the nothing as part of her existential journey toward enlightenment, but the title of the book itself also implies the intangible nothing that permeates the entire novel with recurring anguish and interconnected meaninglessness. *Nada*, as an existential title, challenges readers to evaluate the seeming meaninglessness that Andrea describes and to infer that enlightenment illuminates a self-understanding, indicating freedom from the intangible nothing, or meaninglessness.

Further research might explore different existentialist themes within *Nada*. I chose to focus on Jean-Paul Sartre because his views on anguish and its role in creating the nothing and leading to enlightenment and freedom most clearly illuminated Andrea’s journey. Heideggerian themes like *Dasein*, or “being-there,” would be interesting to investigate, especially surrounding
Andrea’s experiences with recognizing and communicating emotions as she progresses through existentialist enlightenment, seen primarily in the recognition of her anguish and abandonment. Starvation, abandonment, anguish, and death lead Andrea to existential enlightenment and subsequent freedom—an inner journey mirrored in the spatiality of her physical ones throughout the city.
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