

## Comparative Eriksonian Psychocritical Analysis of *Miss Cora* by Julio Cortázar, and *The Lame Pigeon* by Eduardo Mendicutti<sup>#</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

In the adolescence, it takes places identity exploration, in which the fundamentals that define the way the individual thinks, feels and acts would be established; or identity confusion, a defined imagine of the mentioned aspects wouldn't be reached. In this research, we compare *Miss Cora* by Julio Cortázar and *The Lame Pigeon* by Eduardo Mendicutti, whose protagonists are two boys who are at the beginning of adolescence and they have other characteristics that set a similar starting point. Both protagonists are discovering a new manner of thinking and feeling and they have their first experience of sexual desire. However, their experiences are hard because their families and the environment that surrounds them don't accept the change in which they are immersed and both of them suffer to forge an own identity. *Miss Cora* and *The Lame Pigeon* reflect the fragility of the construction of the adolescence identity.

### THE DAWNING OF A NEW IDENTITY

As Mario Vargas Llosa has said, literature tells lies insofar as it refers to facts that have not really happened but which we nevertheless experience as real, in the sense that literary texts delve into the emotions, thoughts and motivations of those who read them. As teachers, we are interested in showing students that literature does not tell stories that are alien to them, but that its fictions address problems that affect them in a highly symbolic fashion. In this paper we consider two texts of different origin and style in order to approach how they portray adolescence, what difficulties they show related to this stage and the outcomes that result from the ways in which the problems unfold. These texts are *La señorita Cora* (*Miss Cora*) by Argentine writer Julio Cortázar, from the short-story collection *Todos los fuegos el fuego* (*All fires the fire*, 1966), and *El palomo cojo* (*The Lame Pigeon*, 1991), a novel by Spanish writer Eduardo Mendicutti. As both are Bildungsroman exploring the development of the adolescent, they may fruitfully be compared with a view to identifying their significance in human terms. To this end, we shall analyse how both works reflect adolescent conflicts.

Adolescence is a period of transit in which the person leaves his or her childhood identifications and actions to open up to an adult form of behaviour and adult references (Erikson, 1994: 155). Childhood represents a situation of certain tranquillity because it is a stage when the person establishes bonds in which he or she trusts. “The fate of childhood identifications, in turn, depends on the child's satisfactory interaction with trustworthy representatives of a meaningful hierarchy of roles” (Erikson, 1994: 159). However, in adolescence, the person questions these bonds and begins to establish a system of values of their own that will help them to act. The change of identity that takes place in this period poses an enormous challenge, which has the individual hard-pressed to defend themselves in the face of an increasing welter of impulses (Erikson, 1994: 156). Society expects the adolescent to forge a personality leading to a stable self adapted to the social context, although this is not an easy task:

Identity formation, finally, begins where the usefulness of identification ends. It arises from the selective repudiation and mutual assimilation of childhood iden-

tifications and their absorption in a new configuration, which, in turn, is dependent on the process by which a society (often through subsocieties) identifies the young individual, recognizing him as somebody who had to become the way he is and who, being the way he is, is taken for granted. (Erikson, 1994: 159)

According to Mircea Eliade, modern narrative reworks mythical and anthropological patterns from previous stories. In other words, it updates essential themes of human nature (in Santa-Cruz, 2009: 39), especially in its Bildungsroman, whose characters are confronted with situations that demand to take action in the face of obstacles (Santa-Cruz, 2009: 40), which symbolically represent the problems people experience in their daily lives. Both *Miss Cora* and *The Lame Pigeon* deal with the tortuous first steps of a child towards adolescence. Both their protagonists are sick and therefore need the help of their families. Moreover, they suffer mainly from the development change in which they are immersed and feel misunderstood. *Miss Cora* and *The Lame Pigeon* allow us to compare how two young people in very similar situations face the challenge of achieving an identity of their own that is different from the people around them. And, in spite of the coincidences, we will see how the tone of each story and the way their characters behave are very different.

In *Miss Cora*, there is an interesting contrast between the narrative technique and the development of the story. On the one hand, “most of the characters are narrators” (Paredes, 1988: 296), whose interventions each reflect their respective inner experiences while also complementing those of the others, as Tamara García points out. Alberto Paredes argues that: “The narrative confluence is the conduit for the affective bonds between them to emerge. The diffuse space of desire is created where each of the three basic characters sends their love impulse” (1988: 296).<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, the main characters do not communicate with each other because they do not have “manifest desires, only emotional tensions resulting from immaturity.” (Mora, 1982: 157). The successive reactions of the different narrators or the dialogue of desire give rise to a great misunderstanding among them (Sevilla Vallejo, 2010: 3). *Miss Cora* can be organized around two themes: “the illness of a child that worsens as the action progresses and, on the other hand, the relationship between the patient and the nurse, which develops as the story progresses” (García, 2008: 251). The illness is the framework of the defencelessness in which Pablo finds himself vis-à-vis the woman he likes and who treats him like a child. In *Miss Cora*, Pablo and Cora alternate their interventions, as one narrator slips into another (Tamborenea, 1986) and this emphasizes the mutual incomprehension.

*The Lame Pigeon* follows “the structure of the initiation story” (Perretta, 2013: 235) more closely. Felipe discovers that his sexual identity is different from what the world he lives in expects. The novel focuses on its protagonist’s search for his sexual identity among the models that surround him during his convalescence. According to Gilda Perretta:

offers a very interesting perspective for analyzing the issue of homosexuality as an example of dissent: because of its structure and its plot characteristics, it can be considered a Bildungsroman which narrates the process of

self-knowledge and personality formation of the individual including, in this case, the discovery of his homosexual identity and, therefore, the problem of accepting difference in opposition to the canon. (2013: 234)

*The Lame Pigeon* presents a protagonist with an identity that clashes with the traditional mentality of the place where he lives. This tense situation is very well portrayed both in the Mendicutti’s novel and in the film adaptation by Jaime de Armiñán (1995). In this study we are going to focus on the analysis of Mendicutti’s work because it lends itself more naturally to a comparison with Cortázar’s short story. The novel is divided into three parts, which correspond to the summer months in which the events take place (June, July and August). Felipe’s journey of initiation is written in the form of an autobiography, but it tells the story of a character whose traits depart from generic norms. According to Virginia Bonatto, this novel transgresses the genre of autobiography, which “has been the genre par excellence for the construction of the coherence and unity of the seamless, adult self [...] it has excluded both women and homosexuals, whose existence are presumed to be relegated to the space of the private” (13). *The Lame Pigeon* presents a biography contrary to the established model. Instead of recounting the steps of a young man until he becomes an adult, self-confident and successful, it tells of the anxieties of a child who discovers that he is a “weirdo”, that is, he has a manner of being that society cannot fully accept.

Another feature common to Pablo and Felipe is the pigeon, which is freighted with symbolism. Both can hear pigeons from their sickbeds. Pablo listens to them from his hospital bed: “They always start at the same time, between six and seven in the morning, it must be a couple nesting on the ledges of the courtyard, a male cooing and the female answering, after a while they get tired” (103). As the pigeons represent the love that he will never attain, that is why they displease Pablo. “I don’t even know how long I’ve been hearing them, the first few mornings I was too sleepy or sore to notice, but for three days now I’ve been listening to the pigeons and they make me sad, I would like to be at home.” (104). In contrast, Felipe hears the pigeon from the bed in his grandparents’ house, where he has gone to recover from a combination of anaemia and distemper: “I noticed a pigeon that was walking around, with a strange, sort of squeamish movement [...] I immediately thought that it was a sad, lonely pigeon and that it was going through a bad time” (26). Felipe remembers that he too was lame for a while: “it took me a long time stop being bugged by the knowledge that I was lame, no matter how little it was and no matter how much I told myself” (27). Later, he discovers through Mary the popular saying “more sissy than a lame pigeon”. In this way, an identification takes place which underlines the fact that Felipe is also gloomy, lonely and having a hard time as well as that he is going to forge his identity as a homosexual in the course of the novel. *The Lame Pigeon* places “emphasis on its character as a territory of becoming” (Fumis, 2012: 1297), that is, on the construction of the protagonist’s identity.

## THE ADOLESCENT AND HIS FAMILY

In adolescence, there is a distancing from family identifications in order to build an identity of one’s own. “Being firm-

ly convinced that he is a person on his own, the child must now find out what kind of a person he may become. He is, of course, deeply and exclusively “identified” with his parents, who most of the time appear to him to be powerful and beautiful, although often quite unreasonable, disagreeable, and even dangerous” (Erikson, 1994: 115). This process is a source of conflict because parents are ambivalent in exercising authority, which must be constantly readjusted, and the adolescent may feel disoriented about who he really is. “They are sometimes morbidly, often curiously, preoccupied with what they appear to be in the eyes of others as compared with what they feel they are, and with the question of how to connect the roles and skills cultivated earlier with the ideal prototypes of the day” (Erikson, 1994: 128). Pierre Bourdieu explains that the family is, on the one hand:

active agent, endowed with will, capable of thinking, feeling and acting and founded on a set of cognitive assumptions and normative prescriptions concerning the correct way of conducting domestic relations: a universe from which the ordinary laws of the economic world are suspended, the family is the place of trust. (1997: 2)

And, on the other hand, we should bear in mind “the relations of coercion between the members of the family group functioning as a field (and therefore, of the history behind this state of things), a structure that is always present in the struggles inside the domestic field” (1997: 7). The family is a space where the identities of its components are staged to be negotiated. According to Domínguez, we must think of the family “not as a social institution, nor as the place where a psychic structure is constituted, but as the place where scripts are brought into play and positions of discursive and interpretative power are negotiated” (in Fumis, 2012: 1297). Each family must define what it means to be a father and what it means to be a son. “It is unfeasible to maintain a saturated and suturing description of what is called family, given that the practices that sustain it -love, reproduction, violence, child rearing, domestic production, etc.- are characterized by differences with respect to the model proposed as irreplaceable” (in Fumis, 2013: 4).

Jo Labanyi points out that “the affective is a way of thinking and knowing, as well as a fundamental ingredient of social life” (2005: 12). In this sense, Pablo and Felipe think and relate to the world in a very different way. In *Miss Cora*, Pablo likes a nurse and would like to court her, but both she and his family consider him a child. According to Roberto Chacana, Pablo’s problem is one of emancipation becomes more complicated due to his illness (2010: 409-411). Pablo’s mother is the main obstacle to his emancipation, which Pablo tries to achieve by distancing himself from his mother and approaching Cora. The mother treats Pablo and the nurse with an authoritarianism that initiates the breakdown in communication: “All of Pablo’s supposed problems with Cora have their origin in Pablo’s mother, because she treated the nurse badly” (García, 2008: 250). The mother should offer him motherly love and Cora could offer him love as a partner, but the characters are unable to communicate: sometimes they come close to each other, sometimes they repel each other. In this context, *Miss Cora* discovers “the warm

affective world of the child, ready to hate or love out of sympathy with singular speed” (Amícolá, 1969: 35). For his part, in *The Lame Pigeon*, Felipe realizes that he is different from the other boys. His behaviour responds to the universe of expectations and desires considered feminine during Spanish dictatorship: he is interested in fashion, he reads *Little Women*, he dreams of being the Empress Sissi... (Bonatto, 2013: 16). These deviations from the norm make him afraid of being called a “weirdo”. “That’s why I kept quiet, that’s why I sometimes kept quiet about many things, because I was afraid of being called a weirdo. [...] So I tried not to do or say anything that would make Mary could tell me, oh, boy, you’re getting weird, but sometimes I was careless and Mary or Antonia or even my mother... would tell me” (129). Felipe’s conflict lies in the discovery of an identity that does not square with most of his family and society in general.

### ADOLESCENT MODELS

Although the models available to Pablo are not made explicit, the story begins with a quote from the song *The Trees That Grow So High*, which is about a woman who is engaged to a very young boy. She has to wait until he finishes school, but he dies soon after the wedding. Pablo is characterized by his despair. From the beginning, he wants to look older and get Cora’s affection and tries to separate himself from the family models, like his mother, whom he finds apprehensive: “Then I went into the room to accompany the boy who was reading his magazines and I already knew he was going to have surgery the next day. As if it were the end of the world, the poor woman gives me such a look, but it’s not as if I’m going to die, Mom, do me a little favour” (84). The way his mother refers to him clearly infantilizes him. She addresses him as her baby and at all times she regards him as a helpless being. On the other hand, *The Lame Pigeon* does make explicit the models available to Felipe looks at. The environment in which he lives is divided into two groups:

The first is made up of those who adhere strictly to the rules of conduct imposed by society: the grandmother, the grandfather, Aunt Blanca and, in general, the visits from high society that they receive [...]. The second group includes those characters whose way of living and behaving in their daily lives does not coincide with what the conservative society of the 1950s would expect of them. Mary, the maid, Uncle Ramon and Aunt Victoria belong to this group, the latter couple being two people who have chosen to lead an independent life, far from their home town and open to a European mentality that contrasts with that of Franco’s Spain. (Perretta, 2013: 236)

Mary, who has no qualms about talking to him about sex, initiates him in his search for identity (Perretta, 2013: 237) and talks to him about Uncle Ramon, a very attractive and possibly bisexual man. One night, Felipe looks at himself in the mirror to compare himself with a photo of Uncle Ramon:

But I wanted to see myself there, in the glass, in the wardrobe mirror, in the same pose as Uncle Ramon in the photo. I don’t know why. I wanted to look just like him [...] Suddenly, I realized that I could already see my



eyes and I felt a twinge in my neck [.]. Suddenly I was horribly afraid, I didn't know why, maybe because I had never been like that before, alone and naked and looking into my eyes. (62-63)

Felipe begins to build his identity by comparison with his uncle. By reproducing his posture, it's as if it were him. *The Lame Pigeon* "uses multiple resources of the Bildungsroman to account precisely for the generic distortion of the self. The ten-year-old protagonist, in fact, shapes his clearly deviant identity, taking into account the view of homosexuality that was held during the years of Franco's regime in Spain" (Bonatto, 2013: 7). Felipe discovers an identity that goes against the ideal of the man who establishes the norm. According to José Jurado Morales, "Mendicutti's literature always represents that part of society that is at the antipodes of the 'wealthy-educated-young-white-heterosexual-male canon' (89). Felipe fits the model represented by the 'weird' characters, which configures 'a learning about gender which is at all points obedient but sexually deviant, or abject' (Bonatto, 2013: 16). In other words, he develops an identity that is censored by the world in which he lives. Aunt Victoria, Uncle Ramon and Mary:

function as guides or mentors (comparable to adult mentors in traditional learning novels) in a context of strong moral, sexual and political repression. Victoria is about a libertine aunt in exile who recites Lorca abroad, Victor a bisexual uncle who is also politically persecuted, and Mary is a maid who is absolutely free from moral constraints and tries unsuccessfully to initiate him into sex. (Bonatto, 2013: 15-16)

### OBSTACLES TO ACHIEVING AN IDENTITY OF ONE'S OWN

In another study, we have analyzed the difficulties the protagonist of *Rayuela* has in constructing his identity due to the conflict he maintains with other characters (Sevilla Vallejo, 2019: 174-175). In this case, the mother, like the other secondary characters, feeds the conflict between Pablo and Cora and the disease gets worse as the conflict gets worse. It is "thanks to the monologues and dialogues of the secondary characters that we learn of the mishaps in Pablo's clinical picture that lead to his death" (Quintero, 1981: 240-241). Pablo is upset by his mother's excessive concern in taking care of him and she complains about Miss Cora's impertinence. As Tamara García puts it, the mother rightly fears "that she will undermine her in front of her son" (2008: 254). Neither Pablo nor Cora know how to react to the other. Cora is aware of the shame that Pablo experiences and he is well aware when she gets angry or when her bad mood goes away, but Cora is not aware of the attraction she feels for Pablo and he pretends to be an adult, when his attitudes are still those of a child. The lack of communication between both makes their relationship tense. After Pablo's operation, Cora takes care of him affectionately and wishes, as in *The Trees*, that he were older: "You're very pretty, you know, with that slightly upturned nose and those curtain-like eyelashes, you look older now that you're so pale. Now you wouldn't go red for anything." (93).

Although Cora exercises authority over Pablo, she also has some passive traits. Thus, her boyfriend Marcial dominates her: "I love undressing her so much and feeling that she trembles a little as if she were cold" (97-98). Marcial exercises the same authority over Cora in their relationship as she does over Pablo professionally. Cora undresses and makes Pablo blush just as Marcial does with her. Tamara García analyses Cora's attraction to Pablo as follows: "We can deduce that Cora wants Pablo to be a man to be with, perhaps because her relationship with Marcial is going nowhere, because she no longer has a teenager's tenderness" (2008: 253). Cora's coldness causes Pablo to distance himself from her: "The boy's initially positive attitude towards the nurse changes until he becomes indifferent to the point, almost, of total rejection. Cora's initial attitude, however, undergoes an affective progression once she has felt sorry for him" (Quintero, 1981: 239). This distancing oscillates: he wants to sleep to avoid seeing her and then he wants to have her by his side. But a total break occurs when Pablo decides to speak: "You are bad to me, Cora" (102), he rejects her caress and adds: "You wouldn't be like that with me if you had met me elsewhere". The character complains of her patronizing, sometimes overbearing, treatment of him on account of the position of weakness in which he finds himself.

*The Lame Pigeon* has a much gentler tone, but Felipe faces an equally complex identity challenge. The text seems to want to say "Reader, don't expect to find familiar images depicting a traditional canon of society"; because the subjects that breathe in its pages are those who oppose regularization, the heteronormative representation of the familiar. Tradition, we repeat, is routed to the margins, and the formerly marginal becomes central to the point of consuming all" (Ruiz, 2011: 1). The characters that Felipe observes are called "oddballs" because of their deviation from the social model that exists for men and women. Felipe's sexuality will alienate him from what society expects of a man. Through his "odd" models, Felipe detaches himself from the identity that society seeks to impose on him and, at the same time, realizes the suffering that this implies:

He is trapped in a aching duality: on the one hand he begins to recognize and accept his difference, but on the other he senses the difficulty and suffering that his identity can cause him in social relationships. Because this oddball, although at times he may even have a loving touch, catapults him outside the limits of what is socially accepted, stigmatizes him as someone who does not fit in completely with what is desired by the people around him, and therefore condemns him to a sad exile. (Perretta, 2013: 240)

Right from the moment he looks in the mirror, he understands that he is entering something dangerous. His body is like another's, like Uncle Ramon's. It will take time for him to come to terms with the sexual identity that is attached to him. "The fear of recognizing his body as an 'other' body is an imminence that can only be taken in as and when he enters adulthood" (Fumis, 2012: 1299). However, Felipe is happy with what he is discovering in himself. In the chapter "Los bichos raros" (the weirdos), his three models and

he are brought together for a recital by García Lorca. This fragment is the culmination of Felipe's identity, because it is made explicit that the four characters thus brought together are united by their "oddness", that is to say, by being outside the rules:

There we were, the four of us, Uncle Ramon and Mary, Aunt Victoria and I, the weirdos in the family, and I'm sure Uncle Ricardo was spying behind the doors, while his pigeons were already, so early in the morning, starting their song and dance [...] It was much better, more fun and more exciting, to be with the weirdos. So I didn't have to be ashamed when I thought that when I grew up I was going to be a freak, and that's why I didn't have to feel sorry for the lame pigeon either, wherever he might be, getting on with his life somewhere, pleased as punch to be called Visconti". (211-212)

The "oddballs" or "weirdos", the lame pigeon and the main character identify each other mutually insofar as they have some undesirable characteristic in the eyes of society. The "weirdos" and the main character feel and behave in unacceptable ways, while the pigeon's injury makes it look tattered. However, they all have a zest for life that in some way makes them special in the best sense. Despite the fact that the rest of the family censors this gathering to celebrate the poetry of a writer who was also beyond the pale of Franco's Spain where the action takes place, Felipe is very happy to be part of it and, for a moment, is not afraid of the consequences of being a freak. "When I grew up I wanted to be like Uncle Ramon and Aunt Victoria, even if I ended up like Uncle Ricardo" (212). Felipe has no fear of ending up like another one of his uncles, who is also a "weirdo" and leads an isolated and chaotic life. In this way, the oppression that context exerts on the character's homosexual identity appears to be disguised, as is the case in other recent Spanish novels (Perriam, Forastelli & Olivera, 2013: 83). Felipe finds a group of reference in which he can feel loved and with which he shares a way of feeling, thinking and acting that partially protects him from the anguish associated with adolescence.

## THE ACHING IDENTITY OF ADOLESCENCE

In the negotiation that takes place between parents and teenagers, teenagers tend to feel that they are trying to limit what they can become or, in Erikson's words:

should a young person feel that the environment tries to deprive him too radically of all the forms of expression which permit him to develop and integrate the next step, he may resist with the wild strength encountered in animals who are suddenly forced to defend their lives. For, indeed, in the social jungle of human existence there is no feeling of being alive without a sense of identity. (1994: 130)

Pablo and Felipe face the challenge of exploring their identity and risk of role confusion that would lead them to not achieving any particular personality. Both can be said to experience an aching identity associated with the adolescence to which they are exposed. However, the environment in which they spend their illness is one of the first aspects

that establishes the difference in tone. While Pablo is in a cold hospital where the other characters and the pigeons do nothing but disturb him, Felipe spends his convalescence in a spacious room in his grandparents' house, which awakens in him a curiosity that enriches his vision of the world around him (Perretta, 2013: 235). While the oppressive space leads Pablo to death (Chacana, 2010: 412), Felipe has the ideal place to discover his identity.

As Pablo's situation becomes more desperate, Cora gets closer to him. She stays with him until the doctor announces that the operation needs to be repeated. Cora "would have liked Martial to go away and leave me with him" (105), but Pablo does not want to: "Go out with him and kiss him in the hall, he wasn't so asleep the other afternoon when you got angry with him because he had kissed you here" (106). The nurse allows him to call her "Cora" for the first time, apparently out of pity for his poor health. Cora allows Pablo the close relationship he had been seeking: "No, Pablo, no," I asked, kissing him on the cheek, very close to the mouth" (107). She even yields to his amorous intents by kissing him "very close to the mouth", but Pablo is too ill, dreaming of the pigeons, and does not call for Cora, but asks to see his mother. He has understood that his mother ".will not disappoint him for all her faults, while Cora, whom he had considered perfect, has betrayed him" (García, 2008: 251).

The limited understanding shared by the two main characters is reflected in the style with which the stories are narrated: "there is an internal focus, a limited vision drawn from within the characters, subject to what they know" (252). Tamará García adds that: "To reconstruct the situation as Pablo experiences it, the facts are told from his perspective [...] They must be completed from a different point of view, that of the nurse. They both tell the same thing, but in different ways: the author shows two different ways of observing reality, depending on who is telling it" (2008: 252-253), but they are unable to communicate their perceptions to the other. Paraphrasing Bakhtin, Cortázar raises a set of perspectives around Pablo's illness, but these collide with each other because they are isolated. Cora's role is a threat to Pablo's fragile identity. Although he wants to take the initiative, she begins the action and her narrative voice is put before that of Pablo, feeding the oppression she exerts on him. And the interventions of the other characters (the doctors' comments about Pablo's illness, the mother's complaints about Cora and Marcial's comments urging Cora to distance herself from the case) increase the tension between both.

*Miss Cora* counterposes two kinds of love. Pablo is tired of maternal love whose excessive care makes him feel like a child. He yearns for a love relationship in an ill-defined way. He contemplates Cora and the most he manages to express is his desire for her to be close. However, Pablo aspires to a more mature love, he does not want to be cared for by his mother but to find a girlfriend, a companion he can treat as an equal. Pablo fastens on Cora's youth in order to bring her closer to himself. *Miss Cora* reflects the anxiety caused by adolescence, where there is: ".an affective flow that no longer corresponds to her (the absorbing mother) but does not yet correspond to her (Cora's love)" (Paredes, 1988: 297). Cora's youth and beauty threaten the mother's relationship

with Pablo. She refers to her as follows: “You only have to look at her to realize who she is, with those vampire-like airs and that tight apron, a filthy little girl who thinks she runs the clinic” (81). The mother also wants to infantilize the nurse to discredit her work and reduce the rivalry between them for Pablo’s affection. As already mentioned, the mother is one of the biggest obstacles between Pablo and Cora. So much so that Cora supposes that what she dislikes about Pablo must be inherited from his mother: “.something in him that perhaps came from his mother kept bothering me...” (87).

Pablo is in his adolescence, which is a time of fluctuating maturity. He already has an adult body, or almost, but his character is still that of a child. He blushes at the drop of a hat, makes no complaint when his sweets are taken away, and hides the photo-story because it is not “a real book”. Just like the boy in *The Trees*, he will grow up very quickly, in this case driven by his illness. By refusing his mother’s care and falling in love with a woman he is pitched into the maturing process. Cora instead belongs, for the most part, to the adult world. She is a nurse and performs her duties effectively. Nevertheless, she presents herself as a woman whose youth undermines her confidence (García, 2008: 252). Her difficulties in caring for Pablo do not stem from her lack of knowledge of her work, but from two insecurities: her authority over patients and her independence as a woman. Cora needs to assert herself in both areas. For that reason, she does not let him take the confidence of calling her “Cora” and fears his compliments: “And yes, they are always the same, one caresses them, says a kind phrase, and there the little man appears” (90). She feels that if she does not keep her distance, the patient will believe he has a right to her. This is best understood by comparison with the submissive relationship she has with Marcial. He treats her like a child and Cora fears that Pablo will also exercise a macho authority over her. The young patient finds no way to advance his emancipation by lying in a bed, unable even to go to the bathroom alone, while others come and go, in and out of the room, and make decisions about his life. For her part, Cora is uncomfortable with him: “there are two post-op patients on the second floor, important people, one asks them calmly if they have gone to the bathroom, gives them the bedpan, cleans them if necessary, and all the while talking about the weather or politics, it is a kind of natural coming and going, each one minding his own affairs” (98). Her insecurity about how to position herself professionally and the unconscious affection she has for Pablo are aspects of her identity that she too is unable to control and which make communication difficult. Pablo evolves from love to disappointment, while she first feels sorry for his shyness and then attraction. When she makes him pull down his pants to shave him before the operation she says, “and it was just as I had imagined it. “You’re a big boy now.” (87) He interprets this as teasing, but what it indicates is that Cora had imagined his body before seeing it and, afterwards, verifies its maturity. She is annoyed “that he was so beautiful and so well made for his age” (87). The lack of communication between both leads to their final falling-out. He can only return to maternal love without having achieved an identity of his own. So that “the eroticism of ‘Miss Cora’

is subjected to the tragedy of a death, which will prevent the realization of a loving encounter between the main characters” (Facal, 2011: 32-33).

In *The Lame Pigeon*, Felipe discovers that he belongs to a group of people who do not follow the rules established by society. The people he takes as models do not respond to what is expected; rather, the novel shows that “there is no single united concept of family, but rather a plurality of thoughts on the part of the subjects that interpret the reality they experience. “Tradition” thus understood is, in these texts, the very image of marginality” (Ruiz, 2011: 1).

Virginia Bonatto has remarked that *The Lame Pigeon* is one of a group of novels from the 1990s that cast a critical eye at the period of the Spanish dictatorship. Although it is not dealt with directly, the Franco era determines the sensibility of the main character: “the configuration of forms of human realization that are emblematic for the present and that are evoked to suture the fragmentation and indeterminateness of the experience of the self and the consequent absence of ideals and heroic conduct that characterize the present time” (2013: 5). Felipe’s vital experience is polarised between one group of people who follow a model blindly and another who adopt their own forms of action which are censored by the rest. The hero must achieve his own identity, even if this means living apart from his community. Mendicutti builds into the story an intimate reflection about the identity of his character, which allows the reader to understand aspects of his formation that are not present in other texts that reproduce biographies:

the past is recovered in order to give consistency to an “I” that, unlike the construction of the hegemonic subject in contemporary novels of memory, resists incorporation into the definition of the civic subject that this type of narrative proposes. This particularity, as we will try to demonstrate, is due to the questioning of the problem of sexual gender, and of the spaces linked to it, a factor absent both in the memorialistic discourse of the official historiography during the dictatorship. (Bonatto, 2013: 6-7)

Felipe lives in a world where one way of thinking, feeling and behaving is clearly distinguished for men and another way for women. “In the system of the heterosexual matrix, the gender that adapts to cultural demands (in terms of the strategic survival of the self) denies the continuity and disorder of desire” (Bonatto, 2013: 8). However, the models he notices and the identity that he begins to discover do not respond to such a strict division. Felipe gradually picks up knowledge about the human being that allows him to enter “progressively into the economy of verbal exchanges: he understands or does not understand, he receives an explanation, he discovers (hence the predominance in the text of the verbs of knowledge)” (Fumis, 2012: 1298). On the contrary, his learning comes at the price of placing him in an uncomfortable position. For example, when Mary tells him dirty jokes and gropes him to provoke him sexually, he is petrified. The normal thing would be for him to react, and since this does not happen he starts worrying.

When I had a slight temperature, I didn’t feel like struggling with Mary to stop her from groping me so much [...]



I wondered whether I was not already in the same boat as Grandma Caridad, who didn't have anything from the waist down and I started getting into a big panic [...] Of course, I didn't tell anyone, not even Mary, because there are things that you feel but you keep quiet, and besides, I wouldn't have known how to explain myself (46-47).

Felipe fears that he lacks something that other men have, and he experiences that difference with shame. At the beginning of the novel, Felipe is a boy who has not had to confront his sexual identity. Therefore, everything that has to do with his sexual identity or his body baffles him, as when he looks at himself in the mirror. Uncle Ramon fascinates him and yet, at the same time, he is afraid that he might turn up in his room, but he ends up realizing that this feeling of fear comes from within him and he senses the following: "inside me there was a secret door" (70). During his stay at his grandparents' house, he will learn and suffer a lot as his sexual identity is formed. However, Felipe discovers in the intimacy of his room his sexual identity more gently than Pablo encounters his split identity. During the first and second part of the novel (the months of June and July), the protagonist discovers some traits that make him look like a "freak" and this sometimes gives him joy and other times fear, but there is no genuine conflict.

However, in the third part (August), his identity is forged. The commencement is marked by the disappearance of Aunt Victoria's ring and the arrival of Uncle Ramon. The latter alters the relationship between Mary and Felipe. Until that moment, she has told him about everything that he cannot see from the bed in which he is recuperating. Both are fascinated by Uncle Ramon, who tells Mary that he sleeps in the nude. She looks for a way to meet Uncle Ramon, waits for an opportunity to see him naked, and promises to let Felipe know when this happens, but does not do so: "she did not wake me up and did not want to tell me anything" (199). Without Mary's confidences, Felipe cannot know what is going on in the house. This change forces Felipe to look at Mary and the world around him more critically: "when this maid begins to hide information from him, the child feels obliged to see the world with his own eyes" (Ruiz, 2011: 3). But the crucial event is the recital that Aunt Victoria gives in front of Uncle Ramon, Mary and him. As mentioned above, the recital brings together the four "weirdos" and Felipe feels that he does not care what society says or, in other words, "the protagonist has experienced the fear of feeling different from others, the recognition and acceptance of that difference through belonging to a group, that of the weirdos" (Perretta, 2013: 241-242). However, something happens to change the situation completely. While Aunt Victoria recites García Lorca, Uncle Ramon fondles Mary erotically, until Felipe discovers that she is wearing Aunt Victoria's ring. Then, Felipe calls her "dirty tart" and, the next day, he tells his grandfather and Mary casts a curse on his sexuality: ".don't find a single bit of skirt in your life that gives your you-know-what a hard-on, that with women you're as limp as a bug in winter, and that even with men you're all shrivelled up, dry and fluffy..." (227). Felipe's growing-up process leads him not only to define an identity, but also to build an independent

judgement. Although Mary has been very important for his personal learning up to this point, he is capable of reporting his misconduct and losing her friendship. By the end of the story, Felipe has learned enough to continue forming his identity on his own. "The story, then, finds its climax at the moment when a complete turnaround occurs, since the one who seeks to institute himself in a position of possessing knowledge and decides to assume the decision to "tell" is the protagonist himself" (Fumis, 2012: 1299). Felipe brings the meeting of the "weirdos" to an end with his outburst, ends his relationship with Mary and has to start a life of his own. In the last chapter, he tells of his preparations to return to his parents' house, before which prospect "he was neither happy nor sad. I didn't feel like staying or leaving. Neither Mary nor Uncle Ramon were at my grandparents' house, and Aunt Victoria hadn't left her room for three days..." (229-230). Afterwards, Felipe asks Uncle Ramon if there is a woman waiting for him and he answers: "There will be one somewhere. And if not, we mustn't lose our heads. The world is full of lonely people" (232). The "weirdos", including the attractive Uncle Ramon, are condemned to live alone. And this is reaffirmed in the last scene, in which the lame pigeon appears: "it seemed to me that he wanted to stay with me, because he felt as lonely as I did" (239). In spite of everything, at the end of the book, Felipe has a certain idea of his identity, which will make him more capable of facing the challenges that will follow. The "language that determines/fixes/imposes, has at the same time previously built up the desiring subjectivity of the narrator; therefore, the speech act that constitutes the story will, in this case, be the spell that counteracts such a curse" (Fumis, 2012: 1300). Felipe has not resolved all his conflicts and doubts about himself, but he is beginning to know who he is and is beginning to see that adult life presuppose personal initiative, even if that sometimes leads to loneliness.

The ending of *The Lame Pigeon* is disturbing because, unlike other autobiographies and bildungsroman, the character does not reach any clear resolution. Felipe realizes that he is going to be alone, but it is not clear what his life is going to be like in any sense. Virginia Bonatto explains that this work is, like others, "influenced by the disruptive problem of sexual gender, which modifies them and prevents them from achieving any closure of meaning" (Bonatto, 2013: 9). *The Lame Pigeon* raises the issue of identity but makes no pretence of offering a model of solution. In this novel, there is a "closure of a type of education that is far removed from its generic prerogatives, in which the achievement of masculinity, the rational capacity to distinguish between good and evil, and adaptation to hegemonic social norms shape the results of learning" (Bonatto, 2013: 16). This text suggests that there is no specific identity to be achieved, but that each person must be in constant search of his or her own.

Adolescent identity building is a complex process due to the conflicts that arise with the family, the incorporation of new models, the clash with various obstacles and, in some cases, the perception that it is a aching journey. Pablo and Felipe are two children who, while convalescing from illness, take the first steps towards adolescence; their

first experiences of sexual desire are crucial to their identity. However, we have seen that the development and outcome of both stories differ greatly due to the way in which the problems affect each of the protagonists. *Miss Cora* is narrated through the succession of the thoughts of the different characters, who inform us of their perceptions and what they would like to communicate to another person, but who do not manage to communicate: “The lack of communication between the protagonists gives rise to the conflicts in the story” (García, 2008: 259). Pablo and Cora wish to encounter each other but are unable to do so because their insecurities prevent them from transmitting this to the other. On the other hand, *The Lame Pigeon* presents the problem of a sexual identity that goes against the social norm. The text explores the indefinable nature of identity or, in the words of Daniela Fumis, tries “to approach the key of that which cannot be apprehended, ineffable and, in some way, the investigation of the familiar, will aim to pursue that “where you are not” that constitutes the self in the text” (2013: 7). In both stories, the protagonists struggle to achieve an identity amidst deep personal pain, but the growing process each character undergoes is very different. In *Miss Cora*, the protagonist does not find his place either within his family or in a romantic relationship that might lead him to maturity. Moreover, as we have seen, there is a tragic tone from the beginning. Pablo never hears a single word of true understanding, nor does he have the wherewithal to cope with the conflict he is experiencing. However, Felipe in *The Lame Pigeon* has some people he can identify with, “the weirdos”, and although this leads him to build an identity that clashes with dominant social models, at least it gives him a personality structure and membership of a group. At the same time, Eduardo Mendicutti’s more humorous approach to the problems of adolescent formation makes the situation less oppressive. In short, *Miss Cora* and *The Lame Pigeon* are two stories that help us as teachers to approach the adolescent’s psychology and suggest ways to help our students deal with this evolutionary stage.

## END NOTE

1. All translations are the author’s.

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