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## Tradition and Education in *The Awakening of Miss Prim*

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**Abstract:** *The Awakening of Miss Prim* is a novel that tells the story of Prudencia Prim in the small town of San Ireneo de Arnois. In the novel, Prudencia is surprised by the way of life of the irenites, who seem to despise the modern world. The novel serves as a framework for ideas that go far beyond the plot. It is a reflection on the values of truth, good and beauty and how they are crystallized in Western civilization. Moreover, this paper will try to show how the whole novel revolves around the notion that there is a truth and that it is beautiful, and what role that truth has in human life.

**Keywords:** Miss Prim, tradition, education, classics, beauty, rebellion, humanities, Western civilization

### Introduction

*The Awakening of Miss Prim* is the first novel by the Spanish journalist Natalia Sanmartín and was published in 2013. The most relevant thing about it is not its great narrative quality – which it does indeed have – or the originality of its plot, but the ideas that are developed in it.

This paper aims to analyze the novel and relate the main ideas that shape it in the light of the thoughts of some of the literary Inklings of the University of Oxford, especially Tolkien, Lewis and Chesterton.

It is a novel about truth, good and beauty; it tells the story of the clash between two ways of understanding the world, the traditional and

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the modern, represented by the inhabitants of the small town of San Ireneo de Arnois and Miss Prim, respectively. The book begins with the arrival in San Ireneo of Prudencia Prim, who is a librarian who holds many academic titles and who comes in response to the demand for employment by a gentleman who needs help organizing his books and who is called 'The Man in the Wing Chair' throughout the novel.

Prudencia soon discovers that San Ireneo de Arnois is not only an idyllic little village, but a colony of exiles from the modern world who have voluntarily left their demons and ideologies behind. The novel narrates the dialogue between the irenites and Miss Prim, between the reason, illuminated by faith, of the Man in the Wing Chair and the sentimentality of the librarian. Prudencia is scandalized by the life of the irenites: they are tremendously educated people who live in a small community where everyone knows each other, and they educate their children in their own homes.

### **The problem of realism**

Although, with this brief summary, it is easy to think that this is a utopia, it would be wrong to attribute this label to it. *The Awakening of Miss Prim* is not a utopia because it does not make a real proposal of how the lives or education of children should be. It is not a realistic novel either. The world of San Ireneo does not exist and it does not seem like the author is proposing it as a possible way of life. According to Sanmartín, we are facing a novel or a story – a means of transmitting the truth – which allows us to intensify the importance of some ideas without having to give reasons for the feasibility of each aspect of the plot. San Ireneo, in this sense, is no more real than a stage, in which truth, good and beauty are proclaimed. According to this idea, for example, life cannot be a continuous walk through the countryside or a permanent intellectual discussion, but this novel recalls the importance of both things in human life.

That is the value of *The Awakening of Miss Prim*, as stated above: not the great elaboration of the novel itself, but the principles and the

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ideas that are relevant in it and that reveal the shortcomings of post-modern life.

This notion that narrative can be an effective tool for transmitting the truth is widely recognized. Joseph Pierce has spoken extensively in this regard, especially when commenting on the works of Tolkien and Lewis. Although Pierce expressly refers to mythology and fairy tales, and in *The Awakening of Miss Prim* there is no fantastic element, the idea that narrative can be granted the license of not always attending to what is feasible in order to give greater relevance to other aspects is still valid. Pierce states that in *The Lord of the Rings* there is a whole philosophy of myth, according to which:

mythology [is] a means of conveying certain transcendent truths which are almost inexpressible within the factual confines of a “realistic” novel. In order to understand Tolkien’s “philosophy of myth” it is useful to commence with a maxim of G.K. Chesterton: “not facts first, truth first.” Tolkien and Chesterton were both intent on differentiating between facts, which are purely physical, and truth, which is metaphysical. Thus a myth or a fairy story can convey love and hate, selfishness and self-sacrifice, loyalty and betrayal, good and evil – all of which are metaphysical realities, that is, true, even if conveyed in a mythological or fairyland setting. (Pierce, 2001)

Pierce gives the example of the parables of the Gospel and of fairy tales, which also appears in a conversation between Miss Prim and the nephews of the Man in the Wing Chair. They explain to her that the Gospel is a real fairy tale because the truth it conveys about man is the same that fairy tales later conveyed in a way that is more pleasant and more apprehensible. It is the real fairy tale not because it resembles fairy tales, but because fairy tales resemble it. Christ himself, says Pearce, transmitted the purest, most metaphysical truth through parables and stories. It does not matter that the prodigal son did not exist in history and it does not matter that San Ireneo de Arnois is not possible. In both cases, they are

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representations; they are the means to convey a truth, which is, in fact, the protagonist.

### **Progress and rebellion**

In view of this, it seems clear that *The Awakening of Miss Prim* is a work whose value lies in transmitting a truth about man, and revealing that truth is the aim of this paper. Nonetheless, this novel covers many dimensions of human life and only some of them can be faced in this paper. Issues such as the political dimension of the San Ireneo community or the role of women and feminism in the novel will remain unwritten for now. This paper will deal with the rebellion against the modern world of the inhabitants of San Ireneo de Arnois, how the education of children is the main weapon used in this rebellion and, finally, the role of truth and beauty in that small community.

The inhabitants of San Ireneo define themselves as a colony of exiles from the modern world. It is a voluntary and not absolute exile, in the sense that they do not reject modernity itself, nor the advances it has made and that, certainly, make the life of man more bearable. What they reject is what, in modernity, predisposes man to live against his nature.

The irenites are not like the Amish, frozen in time, nor are they like the community in the film *The Village* (2004), directed by M. Night Shyamalan. They wear conventional clothes, go to the city, and use electricity and cars, but they do not follow the current proposal of a public life aimed at professional success and a private life aimed at rudimentary pleasure.

Facing a technological world that separates us from the tangible and human reality, which forces us to live too fast, where the family is indefinable and almost non-existent, where the person is an anonymous shadow among an emaciated mass that has stopped contemplating good and beauty, where there is a real inability to converse and to love, and where Aristotle's 'good life' has been changed by a drunkenness of narcissism, the inhabitants of San Ireneo rebel. And they rebel in a scandalous way for today's world: looking back to the past, to tradition.

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We are used to rebellion being the destruction of the present in order to build the future; modernity has convinced us that progress is destroying the heritage of the past and building something new. But this is not true and has not always happened. The West was largely built with a sight on the past; for example, civil law was consolidated looking at Roman law, and philosophy and thought have looked back at Aristotle. Modernity, in this as in so many things, took a radical turn and despised tradition, like Descartes in front of his stove. It despised the wisdom that has been acquired, matured and transmitted throughout history.

In *Mere Christianity*, Lewis addresses this issue and states that progress often means going back: “We all want progress... [but] if you are on the wrong road, progress means doing an about-turn and walking back to the right road; and in that case the man who turns back soonest is the most progressive man” (2015, p. 29).

In a similar sense, Chesterton says that civilization does not equate to progress, which is:

nothing as horrible as a trend or an evolution... Civilization is not a development. It's a choice. It is the decisive people who have become civilised; it is the indecisive, otherwise called the higher sceptics, or the idealistic doubters, who have remained barbarians. (Chesterton, 1912, p. 314)

In Sanmartín's novel, this is the idea that touches the heart of an old monk and the Man in the Wing Chair and leads them to found their colony of exiles in San Ireneo. Around the abbey, a series of characters, who see that Western civilization has the sun behind and the darkness ahead, come together. That is why they order their lives by rescuing those things that made a truly human life possible in the West, although many of them have remained in the past for the majority.

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### Education and children in San Ireneo

What first calls the attention of Miss Prim is the irenites' rejection of the educational system. She is scandalized when she discovers that the children of San Ireneo are mainly educated at home, either by their parents or by other members of the community who excel in some subject. Accustomed to the fact that children are entrusted to the educational system from when they are babies, today's people can also be surprised by homeschooling. However, nothing is more consistent with human nature than the fact that those who have given physical life to a child also give him intellectual and spiritual life. We forget that compulsory attendance at school is a phenomenon of the late nineteenth century, and that before then children were educated and instructed by their mothers at the kitchen table. That is how the great geniuses of history learned how to read, how to write, and how to think.

Again, this may seem a utopia or an anachronism, but beyond the weighing of the different educational styles that, in the end, should be freely chosen by the parents, *The Awakening of Miss Prim* reminds us that parents have an obligation and also a right to educate their children. The school has to be a support to what, essentially, is done at home.

The education received by the children of San Ireneo has two main characteristics: it is not regulated and it is based on the classics.

Regarding the first characteristic, one of the things that was lost with the establishment of an official educational system is the possibility of letting children discover reality, marvel at it and assimilate it at their own pace. We have regulated the learning process, we have classified what a child has to know at this or that age, and what should be read at every moment, and as a result, on many occasions, we are depriving children of beautiful treasures that could have been within their reach long before. The reader of this novel inevitably wonders if the children who appear in it are real, if it is possible that there are children who read Shakespeare and medieval romances. It is intriguing that the same world that robs innocence from childhood in so many things strives to maintain those same children in ignorance of the true and the beautiful. The words that Lewis

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puts in the mouth of the Devil when speaking of regulated education resonate here: “the brilliant student remains democratically chained to his age group throughout the school period. A boy capable of reading Aeschylus or Dante remains seated listening to the attempts of his peers to spell *The cat is sitting on the doormat*” (2013, p. 211).

The nephews of the Man in the Wing Chair are children who have been exposed to the beauty of the world and tradition, and they have assimilated it naturally since they were young. They are children raised with fairy tales, which inspire their games and lead them to create their own stories. In the houses of San Ireneo, there is no minimum age to approach the truth and beauty of the classic works, which are always there, within reach of their sticky and tiny hands.

This is the second characteristic of the education that the children of San Ireneo receive: it is based on a deep respect and love for the classics, which contain the treasures of the Western tradition. Prudencia also appreciates the classics, but as the current academy appreciates them: as something that has to be analyzed, dismembered and commented upon with an absolutely technical language. This is what Inger Enkvist calls the ‘desacralization of great works.’ Enkvist says that today:

instead of reading, enjoying and admiring the great works of the past, quite uneducated students use a terminology that they apply mechanically to texts that they often do not know in order to produce their own texts that look scientific by the presence of certain technicalities. They continue to ignore the great literature, but believe themselves capable of criticizing it. (Enkvist, 2006, p. 96)<sup>1</sup>

In San Ireneo, the opposite occurs. Literature is savored, there is a space for it in the soul and it is allowed to transform it. Children are exposed to the beauty and the truth contained in the classics. Somehow, they are amazed by the truth, they are beaten by beauty and in that fall, like Saint Paul, they discover their humanity.

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<sup>1</sup> My translation.

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This astonishment at the beauty of reality is, according to classical thought, the beginning of the cognitive process. Catherine L'Ecuyer reminds us that Plato and Aristotle identified the origin of philosophy with amazement. Wonder, for L'Ecuyer, is "the desire to know the unknown, as well as the already known. [...] Wonder is precisely what allows us to be conscious of the surrounding reality, through humility and gratitude. Wonder is a sort of reality-based consciousness" (2014, p. 764–765).

As mentioned above, *The Awakening of Miss Prim* aims to demonstrate the lack of humanity of the postmodern world and proposes to heal that by returning to the truth of human nature, expressed in the religious, philosophical and artistic traditions of Europe. It is convenient to talk about another of the things that shocked Prudencia about education in San Ireneo. Irenite children learn the Latin language from a young age and recite Virgil flawlessly. Although it may seem like a snobby caprice from the Man in the Wing Chair or an extravagant expression of nostalgia for the past, let us dare to say it has nothing to do with this. The Spanish writer and journalist Juan Manuel de Prada states that the exile of Latin from schools was the most effective way to destroy the traditional world because it was built in the language of Rome. De Prada argues that

everything that makes us inside, all our moral and intellectual heritage – our truest and inalienable heritage – has been formulated in Latin... The literary genres and the artistic modalities were formulated in Latin; the concepts of person and family, tradition and common good were formulated in Latin; the notions of power and authority, of love and wisdom were formulated in Latin; planets and metals, vices and virtues, dogmas and precepts, contracts and testaments were formulated in Latin. Even our joy and our tears, our compliments and our invectives were formulated in Latin; and today we cry and laugh, we embrace and we get angry because Latin shaped our passions and feelings. Latin is the original principle and the nutritious milk of all the divine and human realities that make up our life; and, to disintegrate such realities, there was only the expulsion of Latin from our life...



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The blood of the Latin language flowed through the veins and arteries of our words and our thoughts. It encouraged our whole life, it was properly our soul; so there is nothing more grotesque than to call it a “dead language”. We are the ones who are completely dead, for letting them snatch it from us. (De Prada, 2016)<sup>2</sup>

This text perfectly illustrates why the irenites strive to teach the classic languages to their children: because they are the natural transmitters of the Western soul, of the truth about humans, that were reflected later in the great works of literature. Therefore, true education cannot ignore them, because the goal of education is to accompany the child in the perfection of his humanity. And when the child is exposed to that which manifests mankind in a formidable way – that is, the Latin language – he is being educated.

### **Beauty will save the world**

Another notion that stands out in the novel is that when literature – and all art in general – manifests the truth and beauty of nature, it moves the soul and is humanizing and educational. The restrained Prudencia Prim never experienced this commotion of the soul and therefore lives in anger, frustrated because the world does not satisfy her desires. In a passage of the novel, old Mrs. Thiberville tells her that she will not be happy until she is “wounded by beauty”. It is a very revealing expression of the effect of the beautiful on the human soul: it hurts our hardness, it humbles us, it excites us, it dazzles us and it transforms us. But the modern world has told us that art is relative, that beauty is an opinion, that a toilet in a museum is as valuable as a painting by Velázquez.<sup>3</sup> The modern man is blind

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<sup>2</sup> My translation

<sup>3</sup> Aesthetic relativism was founded by Kant. It is a “sort of relativism [that] holds that a given aesthetic judgement has different truth-values relative to different aesthetic standards. Maria Baghramian calls this strong *aesthetic relativism*” (Young 2014, p. 13; my emphasis).

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and deaf to true beauty. When Mrs. Thiberville tells Prudencia that she needs to be wounded by beauty, she means that she has to face the message contained in the works of art and let herself be snatched away by it. The vital concern of Miss Prim to reach the beautiful inevitably leads her to travel to Italy, the place *par excellence* where art is splurged in every church, in every street. And there, Prudencia *awakens* when, seeking the beauty created by men, like Saint Augustine, she ends up finding the infinite beauty of the Creator of the universe.

*The Awakening of Miss Prim* is also a story of conversion and of the celebration of all the paths that lead to God. There are two conversions in the novel, one through philosophy and the dialogue with reason, and another through the beauty expressed in art. Regarding the latter, Pope John Paul II, in his *Letter to Artists*, said that "every authentic form of art is, in its way, a way of access to the deeper reality of man and the world. For that reason, it constitutes a very valid approach to the horizon of faith, where the human vicissitude finds its complete interpretation" (1999, n.16).

### Conclusion

In my opinion, *The Awakening of Miss Prim* is not a nostalgic and noveltish song to a better past. It is a true proposal so that, in today's world, wherever we are, we live a truly human life, according to the truth transmitted to us in the religious, artistic and philosophical traditions of the West. The world needs to be dazzled by beauty to have hope and to be happy. This paper can only be concluded by remembering the last paragraphs of the aforementioned *Letter to Artists* by Pope John Paul II, which perfectly show how the inhabitants of San Ireneo de Arnois want to live:

People of today and tomorrow need this enthusiasm [generated by beauty] if they are to meet and master the crucial challenges which stand before us. Thanks to this enthusiasm, humanity, every time it loses its way, will be able to lift itself up and set out

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again on the right path. In this sense it has been said with profound insight that *beauty will save the world*.

Beauty is a key to the mystery and a call to transcendence. It is an invitation to savor life and to dream of the future. (John Paul II, 1999, n. 16)

*The Awakening of Miss Prim* is also an invitation to savor life, to let ourselves be amazed by beauty, to let ourselves be snatched by art, to learn about our humanity and to live according to it. There is no other way to be truly human, there is no other way to be happy.

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