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## Pilar Prim

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*Pilar Prim* is the last great novel of [Narcís Oller](#) and, from the aesthetic point of view, the most successful. It was published in 1906, just over a hundred years ago, after a long, doubt-plagued gestation, as Oller reveals in his *Memòries literàries* (*Literary Memoirs*).

*Pilar Prim* is continually nourished (especially in the opening chapters) by a great number of details drawn from the reality of the times (landscape, legal issues, manners and mores), which Oller's readers could clearly identify and the present-day reader can still recognise because at no point did Oller renounce the poetry of realism in drawing on his observations of the world as he laid the foundations of his literary constructions. In this case, the narrator offers a detailed description of a journey to Puigcerdà in the Pyrenean foothills. This was a trip Oller regularly made in the summer holidays so he knew the landscape of the La Cerdanya area well, just as he was well acquainted with the city of Barcelona and the legal conflicts that could arise from the provisions of a last will and testament. Even today, this first part of the book takes us on a journey through the territory of Catalonia, a train journey that is both real and literary. The reader is made to observe the features of the great panoramic sweeps, the railway stations, the industrial concentrations of the old textile colonies, recognising all the details of the countryside that form part of the novel and that, one way or another, are still part of our surroundings today. Along with them go elements that pertain to the customs of an earlier epoch, which we can perfectly well imagine in this natural setting.

Yet Narcís Oller goes one step further in his innovative progress in narrative technique, in particular with regard to creating characters with a convincing psychological presence. In this work, he constructs a complex, well-rounded, highly contradictory female character who is confronting a destiny against which she must rebel unless she is to disintegrate as a human being. The result is Pilar Prim, a character who stands out head and shoulders above the assortment of characters that were then to be found in novels and who, critics at the time, and even modern critics, have favourably compared with Madame Bovary and Anna Karenina. Pilar Prim is what she is because of the psychological density Oller gives her and the efficacy of the literary technique he employs, which, in this case, incorporates the procedure that Henry James defined as "showing", meaning telling the story in such a way that it seems that the novel is speaking for itself so that the reader can directly witness the full array of passions and the actions of the characters without any interference. He achieves this by way of a fixed internal focalisation, which enables him to unfold the psycho-narration. This psycho-narration has the texture of an inner monologue in many of its fragments, reporting to the reader the innermost thoughts of Pilar Prim and Marcial Deberga, alternating the emphasis between the two characters so that the struggle between their doubts and passions is played out at this psychological level without anybody in their milieu realising. Only the reader knows. I shall return to this below.

From the point of view of its plot, *Pilar Prim* is not very complex and offers the reader just one line of action. The theme is the unveiling of a passion, the doubts it gives rise to and the obstacles it faces until its denouement. The story is that of a still-young woman who is obliged by the provisions of the will of her husband, possessive beyond death, never to marry again if she wants to retain the fortune

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she has inherited, and how she confronts the traps set by her family, the pressures of society, the conventions of the times and her own morality in trying to meet the amorous requirements of a man for whom, at first, she must compete with her own daughter. He is, it must be said, attractive and lively but totally given to the good life and high living, and without a fortune of his own. He is maintained by a wealthy aunt until she eventually decides to break the monotony of her life by marrying an old military man, a fortune-hunter who releases her from the tedium of conventionality, thereby leaving the nephew empty-handed.

The story begins with Pilar Prim, accompanied by her daughter Elvira and her sickly small son, Enriquet, travelling by train from Barcelona to Puigcerdà where they plan to spend the summer. Travelling in the same compartment is an attractive young man, Marcial Deberga, who at first appears to be indifferent to them. However, since it is a long journey and they are confined in such a small space, their mutual curiosity is aroused and eventually they become quite interested in each other. The early chapters are essentially descriptive, without much action, the aim being to present the characters and to set them in context within the space of the novel. It is, we might say, a phase of testing the waters, in which Marcial Deberga, the man, looks at the two women, attentive to both younger and older, appreciating in each of them qualities to which he is not indifferent. The two women, too, independently and uninhibitedly size up their travelling companion. And the narrator, who is omniscient, exhibits great descriptive qualities in offering an abundance of details of the countryside that unfolds before their gazes from the train window while, inside the compartment, we have set pieces showing the relations between the gentlefolk and their servants who are travelling in the same train but in another carriage, and the intimate evolution of the characters' thoughts, which, since they are intimate and remain hidden from external curiosity, are poured out with total freedom and even with some touches of erotic impropriety. The reader, thanks to the marvels of this technique, is privy to the thoughts of the characters right from the start.

This first phase of exploration, which is dominated by the landscape, occupies the first eight chapters. The action is to occur in La Cerdanya. A range of personalities is then gradually introduced to fill in the general backdrop of the novel. Notable among them is the massive Pomposa, otherwise known as the widow Roig, a histrionic, excessive character who is more loathsome prototype than flesh-and-blood person. Her son Rossendo is schematically constructed as a counterpoint to other characters and support for actions that are aimed at frustrating Pilar Prim. The antagonists are from the Ortal family, Pilar Prim's in-laws, who are allies of her young daughter Elvira but also deeply incompatible with Pilar Prim for many reasons, which are revealed as the novel progresses. Basically though, we very soon see that a distinction is made between the aristocratic, idealist and slightly romantic character of Pilar Prim, who does not suffer discomfort and material set-backs gladly, and the vulgarity of the members of the Ortal family who, without a trace of aristocracy of spirit, are crudely bourgeois, ambitious and graceless factory owners for whom money is the only thing that matters. It is worth noting that Elvira, although she is not fully rounded out as a character, takes the side of this pragmatic gang, while poor Enriquet is a kind of diminutive, insubstantial angel, a sweet little cardboard cut-out presence in the book.

The landscape is used as a setting for the characters in the first section of the book but it takes on its own life to become a protagonist that is used to create "climates" that hover over and dominate different actions. It is also a mirror that reflects the emotions and feelings of the characters. Images, synesthesia, the objective correlative and different poetic devices are placed at the service of the psychological impressionism through which the personalities of the characters, especially Pilar Prim, are unveiled.

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At at this early stage, although Pilar Prim and her daughter soon reencounter Marcial Deberga in La Cerdanya, the game of seduction is still vacillating and a number of attempts at possession are played out. In La Cerdanya, we discover the true personality of Deberga, who is under siege from the colossal widow Roig, whom he has seduced in one day of boredom, an episode he now describes as a "pathetic lapse", and whom he flees as much as he can, so as not to jeopardise his image in the eyes of his new acquaintances. Pilar Prim, running away from her own feelings and vying with the desires of her daughter, ends up conceding that the young man could be a good match for Elvira. The apparent rivalry culminates in a tense scene in which the mother can still look her daughter straight in the eye without (yet) hiding anything from her. Wooing, society games, skirmishes with Rossendo who is pursuing Elvira, all take place in this impressive setting that seems to have been constructed only so as to be able to display the grandeur of the landscape, which is portrayed in vigorous strokes and to enormous effect.

The situation continues until Pilar Prim receives news that her elderly and ailing father has died. His death represents a change of direction in the story and a change of scenery because she now goes back to Barcelona with her children. This return to Barcelona means coming back to reality, leaving behind the idyllic climate that had been constructed in La Cerdanya, a milieu where feelings and emotions could have free rein and where the passions of the characters were framed.

Once in Barcelona, Pilar Prim realises that, with her father's death, she has lost her last remaining support. Her daughter Elvira with whom she has never had very good relations (although we are not told why), comes under the sway of Pilar Prim's in-laws, the girl's uncles, who come between her and her mother in order to prepare her for an expedient marriage with a wealthy young man from Bilbao.

Now that the girl is no longer a rival for the young man's affections, the way is clear for Pilar Prim to start falling in love with Deberga, even though she is reluctant to admit it at first. Then she must confront the magnitude of the problem, since she realises that she has no tools or arms for overseeing the direction her own life is to take, least of all with regard to the economic matters pertaining to the textile companies she has inherited from her husband, which her in-laws are fast bringing to ruination thanks to their arrogance and incompetence.

The nub of the novel presents Pilar Prim's conflicts of conscience, revealing them from the internal focalisation of the narrator who skilfully uses the device of psychoanalysis, alternating her doubts with those of the object of her desire, Marcial Deberga, who has suddenly found himself in a completely new juncture in his life now that he has started to work. From the pusillanimous, somewhat spineless, languishing woman, who is subject to the vapours and depression at the slightest setback, unable to form part of a world that is revealed to her in all its harshness, she is transformed in the story with the development of a new female personality, still full of doubts and suffering with the pain of the successes and failures that she eventually faces as her own. Throughout the novel, she has a couple of valuable allies, her women friends, and numerous opponents who strive to keep her as a purely ornamental object. Pilar Prim's personal conflicts and sentimental doubts are exacerbated by the domain of material conflicts once she is obliged to confront the reality of her economic situation after common sense and the disastrous balance of the recent economic management of the factory have told her that she cannot go on living off appearances and denying the problems of everyday existence. The novel also depicts the Barcelona of the threshold of the twentieth century, while also describing the new needs of a textile industry that has to cope with constant technological advances, reinvestment and dynamism in the sector, and showing how those who see their factories as mere showcases for parading their comfortable position in society are doomed to failure. The novel describes how Pilar Prim finally faces both the crisis of her deceased husband's company and that of

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her personal life, and decides, contrary to what she has always done, to play an active part in solving the problems. This will cause her not a few headaches since she will also have to struggle against her own nature and convictions. I shall not speak, for the moment, of the end of the novel and how Pilar Prim resolves her problems of her relations with her husband's family and, in particular with Deberga whom she cannot marry without losing everything, except to note that this ending is something that critics have constantly disagreed on since the book was first published.

One of the most interesting aspects of the novel is the way in which Oller uses the devices of narrative technique to explore a series of possibilities when it comes to description and storytelling. Perhaps the most evident of these is the point of view and focalisation that uses the narrative voice, thus locating himself within the plot and the story he is telling (and hence in relation with the characters). In general terms, this is the author's gaze.

Quite apart from questions of technique, however, the gaze is also one of the reasons why it is possible to follow one of the book's strands and hence to make a reader's interpretation. I shall attempt to explain this by way of a few examples.

Chapter Eight marks the boundary between the two ways in which the narrator tells the story. From the beginning of the book through to Chapter Eight, the characters appear and act in a setting of open spaces (the train, where the story begins, is a closed space but the windows are open and the narrator looks out of them through the eyes of the characters, relaying to the reader how the train moves through the countryside). These spaces that open up between Barcelona and Puigcerdà and in different parts of the region of La Cerdanaya, act in an impressionist fashion in the construction of the characters so that it is in relation with the beauty, the discomforts, exoticism, solitude or great sweeps of nature that the narrator contrasts the states of mind of the characters, and weaves the circle of relationships and feelings.

These spaces, however, are not described by the narrator unless it is through the characters: he describes them because they are being looked at and because they have some kind of effect on the lookers.

The classical (old) aesthetic view of composition contrasts with this description of the landscape from the standpoint of the different lights it sheds and its totally impressionist (if not in terms of composition, at least technique) effects on the characters.

Seeking explanations for Oller's context, we might recall, at this point, the remark he makes in his *Memòries literàries* about how he felt inept with the language in comparison with the great descriptive achievements and wealth of vocabulary that characterised the works of his contemporaries Joaquim Ruyra and Víctor Català. Is it with an eye to the works of these writers that, in depicting the landscape, Oller has this kind of description pouring from the pen of his narrator? It is a hypothesis that is worth bearing in mind. What is true, though, is that the book reaches a point where the technique ceases to be helpful in advancing the novel's action as planned and it slips out of his grasp with the result that he radically changes the narrative perspective and procedure.

At this point, the narrator shifts the action to Barcelona, where the characters are confined in very scantily described closed spaces. The abundance of details that are devoted to nature (in which the characters are mirrored) in the first seven chapters now becomes meticulousness in describing the inner space of what Pilar Prim is thinking (an indirect account of thoughts, which is to say psycho-narration, or direct description in the form of small explorations of what turns out to be an

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inner monologue). By means of this technique, Pilar Prim's doubts and disquiet are alternately contrasted by the narrator (by way of fixed internal focalisation) with the actions and thoughts of her beloved, who is none other than Marcial Deberga. The chapters deal with the two characters in alternating sequence (as happens in another novel of reference, Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* ).

After Chapter Eight, then, the landscapes disappear, while the lengthy descriptions of atmosphere and place, and the details of manners and mores are whittled down to the bare minimum, making way for the appearance of introspection. The narrator is now located at the very place where the thoughts and doubts of the two characters (especially Pilar Prim) are born and the reader is offered an extremely complete overview of what is happening. One has the impression of being a direct witness, to the extent that sometimes it might even seem that one could intervene when there are things that Pilar Prim does not dare to say, especially because she cannot know what Deberga is thinking, while the reader does. When they finally give voice to their thoughts, the reader, who is unsettled by so much uncalled-for dithering, can breathe freely again.

This way of telling the story by projecting the centre of interest into the interior of the character, is no doubt indebted to the boom of the psychological novel at the time the book was written. Oller perfectly frames *Pilar Prim* within this genre. The technique he uses is the gaze effect, which is related with the position in which the author situates himself vis-à-vis the narrator he uses, and how the narrator sees through the characters.

However, this device, which looks like pure technique, is also a thematic motif that runs throughout the novel. The narrator plays from the very start with the gazes of the characters and the reader understands from the first pages how the characters do (see) some things while in reality they are thinking something else. The fact that thoughts are secret gives the impression to the reader that he or she shares part of the secret and is in a privileged position in comparison with what the characters themselves know.

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Fragments de l'obra.

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## comments on the work

### Criticism



**WEB: Narcís Oller a l'AELC**

Inclou biografia, obra, premis, transcripció d'articles, fragments de la seva obra i enllaços.  
<http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/ollern>



**WEB: On Narcis Oller**

Lletra page devoted to the author of *Pilar Prim*.  
<http://lletra.uoc.edu/en/author/narcis-oller/>



**WEB: Narcís Oller i la seva obra**

Arguments, fragments i guia bibliogràfia de *Pilar Prim* dins una completa pàgina sobre Narcís Oller.  
<http://gregal.xtec.es/~jpallas/pilar.htm>



**WEB: Narcís Oller in AELC (Association of Catalan Language Writers)**

Includes biography, works, prizes, interviews and links.  
[http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/ollern/pagina.php?id\\_sec=2441](http://www.escriptors.cat/autors/ollern/pagina.php?id_sec=2441)



**WEB: Narcís Oller and his work**

Story lines, fragments and bibliographical guide to *Pilar Prim* in a whole page devoted to Narcís Oller.

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