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The paintings and stories of the naturalist decadent period of Santiago Rusiñol: a comparative analysis of the thematic code
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THE PAINTINGS AND STORIES OF THE NATURALIST DECADENT PERIOD OF SANTIAGO RUSIÑOL: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE THEMATIC CODE

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In this work I intend to do a comparative analysis of the different elements that make up the thematic code in the writings and paintings of the naturalist decadent period of Santiago Rusiñol. These elements will be the characters, their roles and the way in which they are characterized by Rusiñol as well as the settings in which they are found, the color both in its descriptive and symbolic use and the most recurrent motifs in the literary and pictorial work of this period.

Before beginning with this analysis, it is necessary to define which of Rusiñol's works form the body of work in this epoch. The period that we choose to describe as «naturalist decadent» starts with Rusiñol's first stay in Paris in 1889 lasting approximately up to 1893. During these years both his paintings and his writings mainly describe the life, the places and the people of the legendary Montmartre neighborhood. However, Rusiñol does not conceive these descriptions as mere objective reproduction of reality but as a carefully thought-out protest against a world he rejects categorically. As Enric Gallén points out, in the literature of this period, that is to say, in the articles he writes from December 1890 until May 1892 and that later form the book *Desde el Molino* (1894), there is a change in Rusiñol's artistic orientation. Although he has previously practiced a kind of literature that was closely linked with the humoristic tradition of the «costumbrista» genre we now notice «l'aparició d'un to trist i amarg «mixed with «una vaga mostra de sensibilitat decadent»¹. This decadent sensibility is part of the artist's determination to represent reality's most negative side in his literary and artistic work, a state of mind Rusiñol openly declares in one of his articles of *Desde El Molino* where he writes:

«Tratándose de la desgracia, créelo todo, que todo es posible cuando es malo y nunca sabrá la imaginación combinar realidades tan amargas como las verdaderas. Hay tantas clases de miserias como clases de locuras en el mundo, y

¹ Enric Gallén, «Santiago Rusiñol: La Religió de l'art», *Historia de la Literatura Catalana*, M. Riquer Ed. (Barcelona: Ed. Ariel S.A., 1986), 45-453.

si queremos copiarlo con amor a lo sincero, siempre la nota parecerá negra por poco que a la sensación de la verdad se aproxime el que describe»² (865).

It is because of the emphasis the artist places on the negative side of human existence that we can describe the works of this period as naturalistic.³

We will begin this study by analyzing the different spaces Rusiñol creates in the writings of *Desde el Molino* and in the paintings he produces during the golden years of the Parisian bohemia. These spaces are mainly characterized by the decadence, the misery and even the marginality that emerge from each of them. Everything in these spaces alludes to the deterioration caused by the passing of time. In the first writing, the narrator describes the apartment where he lives. It is furnished with unevenly-matched old chairs and the rooms are lit up by the melancholic light of an oil lamp, the same light that also weakly reaches an out of tune old harmonium. Next to his home we encounter a deserted garden with many trees «pálidos y enfermizos» (826), ivy covering weakly the place, flowers with fading colors and consumptive plants that «mueren desangradas» (826). Rusiñol uses the same sadness to characterize the neighborhood and its surrounding areas. In the distance, covered by a dense mist, the mill, «como un pájaro enfermo» (832) is a mute guard that sadly marks the identity of this legendary neighborhood. The streets and the squares, gray and cold, seem deserted, stalactites flow from the fountains, the streams are frozen, the trees have lost all their leaves and it looks like the sun has been told not to shine anymore. From Montmartre's heights Pari's forms and noises emerge through redish and gray mists. Among the places that the young Rusiñol frequents is a restaurant furnished with gloomy marble tables, rusty iron chairs and some other furniture that can hardly be seen because of the semi-darkness of the premises. He also pays a visit to the studios of the Montmartre's painters. These freezing studios, because of the lack of wood to burn in the stoves, are also poorly furnished and lit. Only a monotonous and weak white light bathes the objects «en una pálida y triste frialdad de anfiteatro» (833). The narrator also takes us to a

² The quotations from Rusiñol's literary work are taken from this edition. Santiago Rusiñol. *Obras Completas*. Tercera Edició. Volum I i II. (Barcelona: Ed. Selecta S.A., 1976). We will mention only the page number at the end of each quotation.

³ We can't forget that around these years, the period that Marfany calls «modernismo inicial», the group of intellectuals that were directly connected with the *L'Avenc* magazine considered Zola's literary works not only as one of the most clear example of modernity outside Cataluña but also as a model to be imitated by catalan writers. On this subject please consult Joan-Lluís Marfany, *Algunes aspectes del Modernisme*. (Barcelona: Ed. Curial, S.A., 1975).

hut, «negro y mal cubierto de desmanteladas tablas» where we find an unhappy photographer, who lives there surrounded by darkness and «olvidado del mundo» (845). Next to this rickety home we see a dying garden. Here, the plant's steams are «flacos y amaratos como piernas dislocadas de niños enfermizos» (845). The narrator offers us a similar sight in the description of the place where an old woman lives. The roof of her home is made out of boards «parecidas a los restos de un naufragio» and the reduced size of the place seems to be a «nido funerario» (866). Montmartre's nightclubs are also described pessimistically. The narrator tells us that from the Moulin de la Galette, «se desprende un algo inexplicable y severo, un aire receloso, un malestar oculto que corre a flor de tierra» (859).

Next we compare what has been said until now with the signs, which form the thematic code of the paintings of this period. The spaces Rusiñol creates on the canvases recall the same images we find in the writings of the same epoch. As Eliseu Trenc Ballester says, during these years the artist is attracted by, «los solares o terrains vagues, los aspectos más humildes y familiares de la Butte».⁴ The subject matter of the passing of time and of human vulnerability is one of the main characteristics of the art of this period. The places depicted on these canvases are poor, almost uninhabited and show the deterioration caused by time, humidity, poverty and abandonment. The places both in the paintings and in the writings are not merely decorative ones but their main purpose is to contribute to the state of mind of the pictorial narrative. There are the broken and abandoned objects that are scattered around the foreground in the painting entitled «La casa de Empeños»⁵ the stunted plants or the wrecked pavement and the walls chipped by humidity in the two paintings entitled «Calle de Montmartre». In the foreground of the painting «Cementerio de Montmartre» there is a waste land full of rubble with some of its walls almost totally wrecked and an old covered wagon without its front wheels. Lastly on the background of the painting entitled «Suburbio de París» we observe a group of humbly wooden houses surrounded by rickety fences.

As in the writings, indoor scenes are depicted in a very depressing way. The artist paints a succession of small rooms that are not only poorly furnished and lit but also in a generally bad condition. In these

⁴ Eliseu Trenc-Ballester, «Santiago Rusiñol: del realismo al simbolismo». *Revista Estudios Pro Arte*. 5, (1976), 65.

⁵ The reproductions of the paintings that are analyzed here but that are not included in this article can be found in the recently published monograph by Isabel Coll i Mirabent, *Santiago Rusiñol*. (Sabadell: Ed. AUSA, 1992). We will mention here only the titles as they appear in her book.

frozen interiors we find a series of lonely characters, who unsuccessfully try to warm themselves. To illustrate these scenes the reader is referred to the paintings «Ramón Canudas enfermo» (figure 1), «Miguel Utrillo delante de una estufa» and «Retrato de Clarasó leyendo».

In all these paintings we get the same impression from looking at the rooms, houses and patios and when we observe the vegetation, as we have already seen in the painting «La Casa de Empeños». The dry and lifeless bushes desperately trying to survive in the icy «Jardín de Invierno» closely recall the description that Rusiñol gives in the first story of *Desde el Molino* as well as all the gray and stunted trees that generally appear in almost all the paintings depicting outdoor scenes.

The characterization that Rusiñol does of Montmartre's places is also used to portray the characters that live in them. All the figures that pass along Rusiñol's pages and paintings show the desperation of being trapped in a world that unfairly determine them forever. All of them live in apathy and sadness, being aware of their reality but lack the necessary power to change it. Misery, anonymity and marginalization are some of the words that we associate when we look at the characters of the writings and paintings of this period. At a restaurant's basement we find a group of customers that «vive muy lejos del mundo y su ruido» and that «no respiran el mismo aire que el resto de los mortales, formándose el vacío cerca de ellos y la soledad más grande: la soledad de los muertos» (831). An even more gloomy character, an itinerant singer, will come and try to cheer up this sad clientele. His eyes, small and sad, his slim figure, his worn-out shoes and suit and his songs, «tristes como árboles sin hojas» (831) produce a deep melancholic feeling. In the same premises we find a pale little girl, «una siempreviva en un sepulcro, un lirio sobre un charco» (831), who tries to earn her living by reselling the flowers that she takes from the nearby cemetery. At the puntillist painter's studio a lethargic model poses for the artist completely unaware of her surroundings. At the back of a hut, «aletargado en el fondo de su mísera vivienda» (849) the unhappy photographer thinks about his past while at the Moulin de la Galette a poor moor «acurrucado y plegado sobre él mismo» (860) dreams about a more decent life. Also, in the same posture in which we found the moor, we meet the sick engraver Ramón Canudas, who awaits his last moment looking sadly through a window.

The decadence and sadness are characteristics that we find in all the characters although expressed in different ways. It may be by sickness, as in the case of the engraver Ramón Canudas or ancianity, as the old woman in the painting entitled «Laboratorio del Moulin» or simply poverty as we can see in the paintings «La Casa de Empeños»

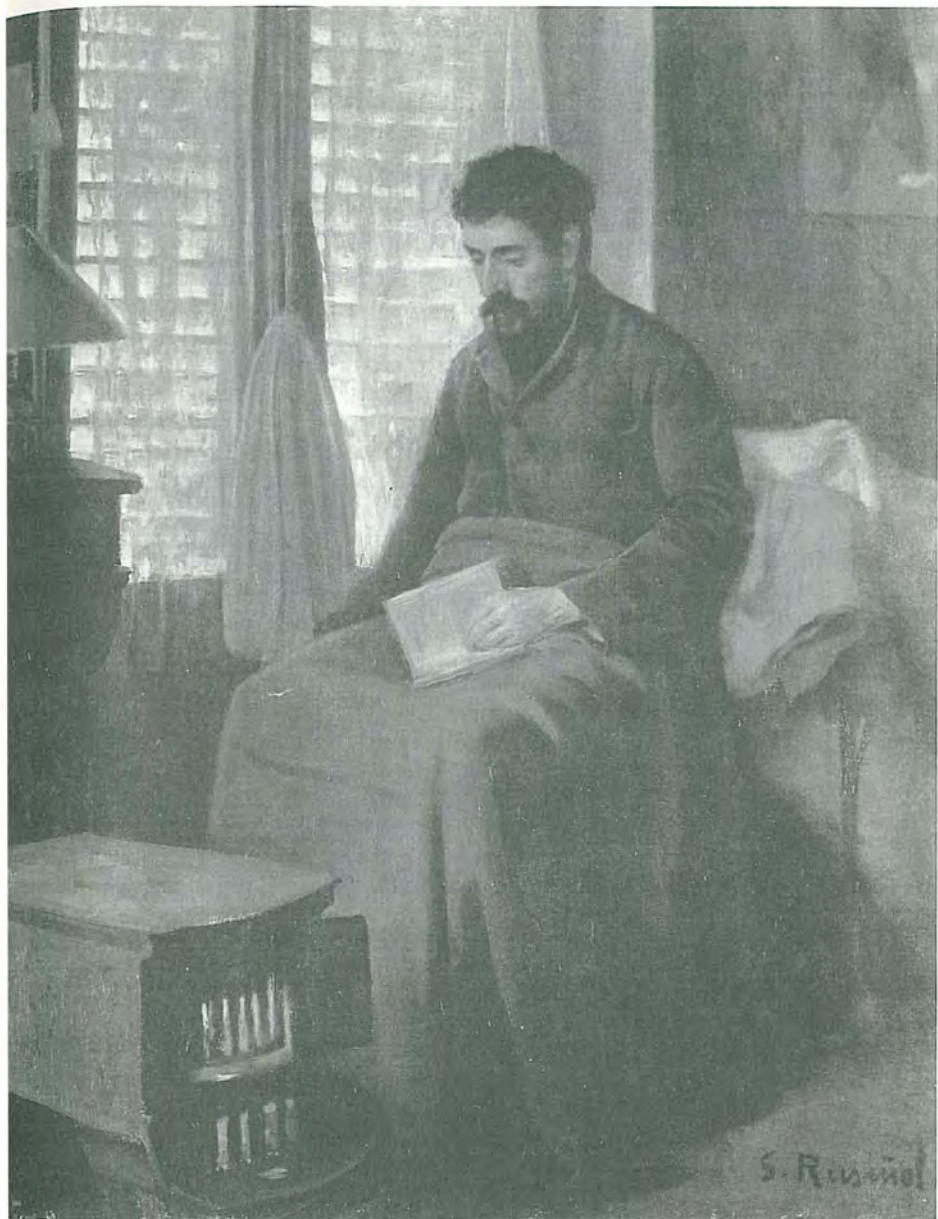


FIGURE 3: «RETRATO DE RAMÓN CANUDAS ENFERMO» EN SANTIAGO

1602 RUSÑOL, POR ISABEL COLL. ED. AUSA, SABADELL, 1992 P. 251

and in the portraits of Ramón Canudas (figure 3), Miguel Utrillo and Clarasó.

The lack of communication and anonymity are also characteristics that repeatedly appear on these canvases. As has been seen so far, the majority of the characters Rusiñol creates in the paintings and stories of this period are solitary human beings, who appear to take refuge inwardly. However, the feeling of isolation and apathy we experience by looking at them is not only achieved through the sad expression of their faces but also by the location they occupy both in the narrative and pictorial space: the old woman, who rests all curled up on the left wing of the stair in the painting entitled «Laboratorio del Moulin», the poor woman, who sadly leaves the pawnshop in the painting «Casa de Empeños» and the solitary artists, who take refuge inside their rooms. All these characters are situated to one side of the composition, curled up and surrounded by the semidarkness of their rooms. The ones we find at Montmartre's night clubs are depicted with similar characteristics. The location the artist assigns to each of them is also very significant. In the painting, «Interior de un Café», on the left, a young woman surrounded by half-light leans sadly on a small table. Her pale face and her melancholic expression tell us about the sad nature of her thoughts. In the painting «El Moulin de la Galette» (figure 2), the character, with his back to the spectator, slightly to the left of the composition, also leans on an old wooden table. His melancholic attitude is echoed by the sad premises. This place, besides being deserted and in poor condition, expresses the icy atmosphere of the Parisian winter through the use of cold colors and the depiction of stunted vegetation. In his canvases, Rusiñol introduces a series of maladjusted beings, who try to avoid a reality they can hardly tolerate. In his stories Rusiñol situates the characters in the same way as in his paintings. The location is carefully thought in order to reinforce the feeling of social isolation that seems to afflict all these characters. They are not only usually found in basements or in isolated corners but also are all curled up within themselves. Rusiñol deliberately emphasizes the characters failure to adapt to reality and the suffering caused by the misery of their daily life. The customers of the restaurant beside the cemetery eat silently at the basement of the premises, a space, which is also shared by the pale singer and the florist girl. In a forgotten corner of the painter's studio there is a worn-out model posing, and in another story a sick artist tries unsuccessfully to warm his icy studio with the small fire burning in front of him. The lethargic photographer lives in the semidarkness of his hut and the moor of the Moulin de la Galette, all curled up, tries to survive «en un rincón de la sala, en el sitio más apartado y oculto» (860).

Another important characteristic, besides the «*tedium vitae*» that



FIGURE 2: «EL MOULIN DE LA GALETTE» EN SANTIAGO RUSIÑOL,
POR ISABEL COLL. ED. AUSA, SABADELL, 1992 P. 226

we mentioned before, is the theme of decadence, which manifests itself not only in the social aspect but also in the moral and physical one. All the characters are victims of a declining process, that according to the narrator, will continue until the last day of their lives (845). In these stories, the poor peddler girls are victims of a decay they have been dragging on since their birth. This marginal condition is also shared, as we have already seen, by the singer, the painters and their models, the photographer, the old women that takes care of the street dogs and the moor as well as all the characters that we find at Montmartre's night clubs. The degradation is not only economic but also moral. The photographer, aware of his terrible failures, contemplates his life, «monótona como una llanura sin fondo,... inmóvil sin ninguna sensación que le levantara su espíritu» (849); the old man from Castilla, leaving behind his vocation for agriculture and his country, finds himself in the survival situation of having to dance dressed as a clown in a Montmartre's night club ; and the solitary moor, in order to earn a living was forced to «nutrirse del escándalo antes que morir quizá en la soledad de su tierra» (860).

Beside these characteristics there are some motifs that appear repeatedly in the stories and paintings of this period. The cold weather is a constant feature in almost all of them. It does not only freeze fountains, ponds and streets but also invades the artist's studios and even the character's souls. Some of them, «viven sin amar y no gustan del encanto de la risa, ni del fuego de la palabra, ni de nada que pueda infundir calor a sus fríos corazones de convidados de piedra» (831). In the paintings, it is reflected not only in the leaden gray color of the sky, in the palette rich in cold and unsaturated colors and in the stunted vegetation but also in the curled up position of the characters as well as in the serious expressions of their faces.

In many of the stories of the period, humidity assumes an evident negative connotation as a corrosive agent that takes an active part in the process of deterioration into which objects, places and characters are plunged. In the artist's garden, «la humedad despinta las pocas flores de papel desteñidas» (826), the basements of the restaurant beside the cemetery are «oscuros, húmedos y sólo adornados con el tubo de una estufa» (830), the old pictures that decorate the photographer's hut are mounted on «cartones hinchados por la humedad» (846). Finally, when Rusiñol recalls his convalescent friend, Ramón Canudas, at his apartment in Montmartre he remembers the humidity of the place as well as the neighborhood's bare trees (881). In the paintings of the same period, the presence of humidity is also felt because of the constant use of gray shades and the persistent mist that envelops buildings and trees blurring their outlines like, for example, in the paintings «Calle de Montmartre» or in «Cementerio de Montmartre». Environmental

humidity is also present on the canvases: in the small puddles that appear beside the drains, the peeled walls we find in almost all the interiors, the wet mud of the streets and the leaden gray of the sky.

Another motif, which is constantly present in the work of this period is the lack of light, the eternally gray shade of the atmosphere. There is a marked predominance of the gray, of dirty colors in order to describe chromatically persons and places. Color is, literary and pictorially, a crucial element that completes and emphasizes the feeling of sadness and abandonment, which emerges from all the places the artist creates. Alluding to the color of the paintings of this period, Isabel Coll i Mirabent points out a notable tendency towards the use of grays and she refers to these canvases as «cuadros de boires i taques de color de fum».⁶ Rusiñol uses a palette where the predominant colors are the ochre, the sienna and a wide range of grays, the same colors that he employs in the descriptions in his stories. As for saturation, he avoids the use of pure pigments, of lurid colors, and mixes them, generally with white and gray. In this way he creates a gray and earthy tonal harmony that helps to definitely establish, «la nota gris dominante» (833), a distinctive characteristic of all the literary and pictorial art of the period.

All the colors that the artist uses to describe the objects in the photographer's hut are faded, the general impression that the narrator has from the city of Ruan is a gray one, the moor's face is gray, the tubercular gardens display the same range of color and the melancholic feeling that emerges from Montmartre is partly caused by the deep gray of the sky (869). From Montmartre, Paris emerges like a blurred image «por el humo denso y pesado de las múltiples chimeneas, que sube y se cierne sobre las casas, entristeciendo la atmósfera» (829). The smoke shades off the city and blurs the interior of Montmartre's night clubs, which are enveloped in «una niebla espesa como gelatina» (852). In the paintings, the pale colors that mix with the gray fog of the sky and with the chimney's smoke contribute also, as in the stories, to emphasize the muted tonal harmony so characteristic of the period and create an environment of an undefinable melancholic feeling, such as in the paintings «Suburbio de París» or «Calle de Montmartre». We find this dense and persistent fog covering all the paintings of Montmartre as it can be seen, for example, in the ones entitled «Jardín de Invierno» and «Cementerio de Montmartre».

Regarding the amount of light in the color, the canvases of this period are not bright. Light in these paintings, as well as in the stories, is never a warm, yellow one but a white, monotonous and cool lumi-

⁶ Isabel Coll i Mirabent, *Assaig sobre les diferents etapes pictòriques de Santiago Rusiñol*. (Sitges: Palau de Maricel, 1981), 21.

nosity. Because of the lack of light, the interiors are enveloped in a semidarkness that also reaches the characters who live in them. This aspect and the use of cool colors intensify the lack of vitality and sadness that emerge from all of them.

Darkness, coldness, decadence and alienation are signs that constantly recur in the literary and artistic work of this period. These signs generate a long series of association of ideas that irrevocably leads to the fundamental concern that underlies the totality of Rusiñol's work and that is the fear that the artist feels towards death and the lack of power to avoid it.

From what we have said so far we can conclude that there is a strong similarity among the signs that form the thematic code in the paintings and stories of this period. Not only as far as the signs in itself, signs that we find both in the literary and in the artistic work of this epoch, but also in the way that they are handled by the artist in both artistic mediums.

The obsession the artist shows toward the passing of time, toward human mortality and its miserable condition determines, as we have said previously, the existence and the manipulation of all the signs we have analyzed. Through his literary and plastic art Rusiñol tries to show his contemporaries the rejection that he feels towards a world that he considers to be a vulgar and materialistic one. Because of this, the art of this period is an art of regeneration, an art that aims to obtain, throughout the negativism in which reality is portrayed, a response from the public, a change that comes up as a reaction to what is being represented so pessimistically in these paintings and stories. However, when Rusiñol realizes that his goal is not achieved and that society, despite being aware of the negative aspects of reality fails to come up with any change, he decides to abandon this kind of artistic representation and seeks refuge in an art that is pure estheticism and that is totally away from reality. In this new artistic period, Rusiñol will not try to change anymore what he does not like. He will attempt to create an alternative world, a fictional literary and pictorial space parallel to the real one in which all those human beings that are not capable of battle with reality will seek refuge.

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