

# The Liminality of Death in *La amortajada* (1938) by María Luisa Bombal

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## Abstract

*La amortajada* by María Luisa Bombal describes the experiences of Ana María, a recently deceased woman as she is prepared for burial. The focus of this research is to compare Arnold van Gennep's theory of rites of passage and Victor Turner's characterization of liminality with the rite of passage of the protagonist. In the second phase of a rite of passage, *limen* phase, a person has lost their previous identity and has not gained another. I expand Turner's use of liminality of this phase to the period of death of Ana María in *La amortajada*. As the main character transitions from her recent death to burial, the *limen* phase provides a new space and time for her consciousness to explore past memories and the present surroundings and changes her state physically, mentally, and culturally.

## Introduction

María Luisa Bombal published *La amortajada* in 1938. The "amortajada" translates to the "shrouded woman" and this novel begins with a description of the protagonist, Ana María, waking up during her funeral. Instead of explaining the cause of her death, the narrator describes Ana María's abilities to see and feel although she is dead. In this manner, Ana María observes the surrounding family and friends and remembers her relationships with them. The primary omniscient narrator describes the scenes of the past and present. However, in an indirect style, the narrative voice allows other characters to speak such as Ana María, Fernando, and the priest.

Ana María recounts her history with her first lover Ricardo, her husband Antonio, and her confidant Fernando. She also recollects her relationships with her sister Alicia and her three children Alberto, Fred, and Anita.

The stories emphasize Ana María's struggles from when she was alive, particularly regarding her romantic and familial relationships. Towards the end of the novel, the family and friends place Ana María in a coffin and carry her to the cemetery for burial. In the earth, Ana María rests in her new surroundings as she connects with nature.

This transition from death to burial resembles a rite of passage, influencing her interpretation of her memories and environment and her physical and cultural state. French ethnologist, Arnold van Gennep, described rites of passage in the context of tabu and totemism in Madagascar (Belier 144). According to Van Gennep:

Transitions from group to group and from one social situation to the next are looked on as implicit in the very fact of existence, so that a man's life comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings: birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher class, occupational specialization, and death. For every one of these events there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined. (3)

These ceremonies, rites of passage, "...may be subdivided into *rites of separation, transition [liminal] rites, and rites of incorporation*" (Van Gennep 10-11).

Using Van Gennep ideas of liminal rites, British anthropologist Victor Turner explored ceremonies and symbology of rites of the Ndembu in Zambia (Van Gennep 11; St. John 4,6). According to Turner, separation refers to the symbolic separation of the individual from their role in society or from their state. *Limen* defines a person who encounters an intermediary phase in which they lose their old state and have not gained a new one (Turner, "Liminality and Communitas" 359). The person is not recognized by society due to their lost attributes and lives in the margins during this intermediary phase (Turner, "Betwixt and Between" 88). Aggregation signifies that the individual gains a new state with specific social expectations. With this new state, the individual "...has rights and obligations vis-à-vis others of a clearly defined and 'structural' type..." (Turner, "Liminality and Communitas" 359).

Liminality, the transition of a person's state, is an anthropological term first proposed by Arnold van Gennep and later applied in Turner's case studies. According to Turner, state is "...determined by his culturally recognized degree of maturation as when one speaks of the 'married or

single state' or the 'state of infancy'" (Turner, "Betwixt and Between" 88). Besides being dictated by a culture, states can also be defined by a person's physical, mental, emotional, or ecological condition. People who are changing states "...are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, "Liminality and Communitas" 359). As a result, "... these persons elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states and positions in cultural space" (359). One example of liminality that exemplifies the idea of transitioning states is a rite of passage of the Omaha. During the transition between boyhood and manhood, the people who were transitioning separated themselves from their community by traveling into the wilderness. There, they fasted and prayed (Turner, "Betwixt and Between" 91). In this liminal state, the person loses their identity as boy but has not gained the future identity as a man or a *mixuga*. Instead, their identity is ambiguous, "not-boy-not-man", until the vision quest is complete (89).

Another example of liminality is based on Turner's studies on the rites of the Ndembu. The Ndembu describe the liminal period as "kunkunka, kung'ula", meaning "seclusion site", which emphasizes the separation of the transitioning

person from the community and their previous state (90). The transitioning people are "...commonly secluded, partially or completely, from the realm of culturally defined and ordered states and statuses" by moving them to a separate place in the community or by being "...disguised, in masks or grotesque costumes or striped with white, red, or black clay, and the like" (90). For instance, the installation rite of a future chief results in separateness and ambiguity of identity. The chief-elect and his ritual wife are separated from the community by convening in a hut, a *kafu*. This word originates from "ku-fwa, 'to die'" (Turner, "Liminality and Communitas" 362). In this sense, the previous state as a common member of the community but the identity as chief has not yet been realized. After the ceremonial washings and *Kumukindiyila* rite, the transitioning individuals are reintroduced to society with the new states as commoner or chief (362-363).

I intend to extend Turner's definition of liminality in rites of passage to include the dead whose consciousness experiences a period of transition between the physical death of the individual, the shrouding of the body, the wake, and, finally, the burial. The narrator of *La amortajada* portrays the death as a process rather than a single event, with the first physical death triggering an internal conflict with

the past, eventually leading to the burial, or Ana María's final death. Despite the physical death, the protagonist remains in what I call a "liminal space". Her physical mobility is restricted, but her consciousness allows her to remember her past life and observe her friends and family in the present. From Turner's idea of transitioning states, Ana María no longer holds the previous states of being alive, a member of the community, or a mother. She also does not hold the state of being a member of the deceased. Therefore, she exists between physical and cultural states after her death and before her burial. This study investigates how the *limen* phase creates a new betwixt time and space for the central character and how liminality changes her state. While Turner focuses on the cultural significance of liminal states, I focus on the emotional, mental, and physical significance of the individual's liminal state.

### **Separation, *Limen*, and Aggregation in *La amortajada***

In *La amortajada*, the state of Ana María is ambiguous because she lives between her recent death and her burial. Separation, the first phase of a rite of passage, occurs at her physical death. She is separated from her community of the living with a non-functioning, shrouded body,

and the inability to communicate with the family around her. Starting at her wake, the living family and friends cannot interact directly with Ana María's consciousness, "A la llama de los altos cirios, cuantos la velaban se inclinaron, entonces, para observar la limpieza y la transparencia de aquella franja de pupila que la muerte no había logrado empañar. Respetuosamente maravillados se inclinaban, sin saber que Ella los veía. Porque Ella veía, sentía" (Bombal 5). Her new state as recently deceased prevents her from having interpersonal interactions with the living although she can observe them.

In *La amortajada*, Bombal has created a fantastical world where the character Ana María exists between both the living and dead. She can participate with the living through her observations. Yet, she cannot communicate with them and cannot utilize her previously living body. During the wake, the narrator describes that Ana María sees the people and feels happy because they "...puedan admirarla así, los que ya no la recordaban sino devorada, por fútiles inquietudes, marchita por algunas penas y el aire cortante de la hacienda. Ahora que la saben muerta, allí están rodeándola todos" (5-7). In addition to being able to observe the environment of the wake and the burial, she can also reconsider her experiences in the

past in this *limen* phase. Throughout the novel, the timeframe and setting change between 1) the memories and 2) the wake and burial in the present. Her cultural state changes in this transition. On the one hand, she is separated from her previous identities as wife, mother, or lover as she no longer plays these roles (8-9). However, she has not completely gained the identity of the buried dead.

The burial represents the last phase of liminality, aggregation, in which Ana María emerges from her ambiguity and gains a new state. She completes her transition and accepts the new state as the buried dead. From the coffin to the cemetery, she prepares herself for the end of her liminal phase, remembering the significance of her romantic relationships. She slowly accepts her burial, expressing her tiredness and her desire to stay in her coffin instead of continuing to participate in the land of the living (82-90). When the family and friend move her body from the bed to the coffin, Ana María expresses, “¡Qué bien se amolda el cuerpo al ataúd! No la tienta el menor deseo de incorporarse. ¡Ignoraba que pudiera haber estado tan cansada!” (82). Later, the narrator describes her desires to rest in the earth with the dead:

Y ya no deseaba sino quedarse crucificada a la tierra, sufriendo y gozando en su carne el ir y

venir de lejanas, muy lejanas mareas; sintiendo crecer la hierba, emerger islas nuevas y abrirse, en otro continente, la flor ignorada que no vive sino en un día de eclipse[...].No tentó a la amortajada el menor deseo de incorporarse. Sola, podría, al fin, descansar, morir. Había sufrido la muerte de los vivos. Ahora anhelaba la inmersión total, la segunda muerte: la muerte de los muertos. (91)

The narrator notes a transition of Ana María between the death of her body and the second death in which her body is buried. The description, “descansar, morir,” is like symbolism associated with liminality: the death of the previous state to later be symbolically reborn in a new state. This description signifies the end or death of the intermediary state for Ana María as she gains a more permanent state with “immersion total” (90-91). The new state, the second death, would allow her to rest rather than remaining between the worlds of the living and dead. In addition to the physical change between above and below ground, she also changes mentally and emotionally. Her thoughts switch from her memories and observations of the living family and friends to the sensations of Earth's nature. Once she rests in the cemetery, the novel ends in the aggregation phase of a rite of passage.

## Benefits of Liminality

The first benefit of liminality is that during the *limen* phase, the consciousness of Ana María functions to observe and express feelings and reasoning about the past and present. Although the narration does not directly explain the nature of the consciousness, the protagonist's observations during the liminal phases are fluid, moving between time frames. She is not limited by the physical body's internal clock or physical stress. Her consciousness wanders between the present and past and between different locations that hold significance and back to the location of her physical body in the present.

Alberto Toutín and Mario Federico Cabrera argue that the various perspectives of narration and the unique time and space of Ana María "...hilvana[n] fragmentos y repeticiones que hacen a la historia de la protagonista..." (Cabrera 163-164) and "...se abre[n] a nuevas sensaciones que la vinculan, desde una hondura inédita, con la vida de la naturaleza y también con la vida humana y sus avances tecnológicos..." (Toutín 76). Throughout the novel, she recalls significant life events with her lovers, Ricardo, Antonio, and Fernando. When looking back on her relationships with the men, Ana María says, "Pasaron años. Años en que se retrajo y se fué volviendo

día a día más limitada y mezquina. ¿Por qué, por qué la naturaleza de la mujer ha de ser tal que tenga que ser siempre un hombre el eje de su vida?" (Bombal 74). Her statement shows how she felt controlled by the dominance of men in her life and her limited social role of keeping the house in order.

The *limen* phase also allows Ana María to connect the present with the past. During the wake, she shares her revelations about familial and romantic relationships. She notes that Alberto's agony has increased over time:

Son los párpados los que lo cambian, los que la espantan; unos párpados rugosos y secos, como si, cerrados noche a noche sobre una pasión taciturna, se hubieran marchitado, quemados desde adentro. Es curioso que lo note por primera vez. ¿O simplemente es natural que se afine en los muertos la percepción de cuanto es signo de muerte? (36)

Ana María recognizes the severity of the issue that Alberto is facing because she is already dead. She laments the decisions of her son, exclaiming, "¿Por qué? ¿Por qué cela a su hermosa mujer? ¿por qué la mantiene aislada en un lejano fundo del sur?" (36). His jealousy over his wife's beauty and the fear

that she may be desired by others cause his suffering. In addition to isolating his wife María Griselda from the world, he also burns all of the portraits of her so that no one is enamored by her beauty (36-37). By being dead, Ana María can see how her son has begun to die figuratively because of these personal issues.

Due to her ambiguous state, Ana María's relationship with Antonio changes. While she was living and before seeing Antonio at the wake, she was angry at Antonio because "...ya no la apenaba el desamor de su marido, ya no la ablandaba la idea de su propia desdicha. Cierta irritación y un sordo rencor secaban, pervertían su sufrimiento" (75). During the wake, Ana María gains vengeance for the suffering he inflicted by observing how he has aged. She finds satisfaction in his loss of youthfulness. She believes that "Lentamente empezará luego a corroer esa belleza que nada había conseguido alterar, y junto con ella irá desmoronando la arrogancia, el encanto, las posibilidades de aquel ser afortunado y cruel" (77). However, feelings of sorrow for him and the will to return to life arise in Ana María. When Antonio begins to cry, she notices that her bitterness towards him diminishes: "A medida que las lágrimas brotan, se deslizan, caen, ella siente su odio retraerse, evaporarse. No, ya no odia. ¿Puede acaso odiar a un

pobre ser, como ella destinado a la vejez y a la tristeza? No. No lo odia. Pero tampoco lo ama" (78). This wake scene shows that her feelings have changed because of her new perspective at the wake. These feelings resulted from the reflection on her past and present states through liminality of her death process.

By observing her lover, Ricardo, she also recognizes the significance of their relationship and solves the internal conflict created by the deterioration of their relationship. Previously, he had sex with her, resulting in pregnancy, and then left her without warning (18-21). Ricardo's abandonment caused painful memories and emotions (18-19). However, while she transitions from death to burial, she realizes that Ricardo has loved her even though he stopped communicating and spending time with her:

El brusco, el cobarde abandono de su amante ¿respondió a alguna orden perentoria o bien a una rebeldía de su impetuoso carácter? Ella no lo sabe, ni quiere volver a desesperarse en descifrar el enigma que tanto la había torturado en su primera juventud[...]Pero ahora, ahora que él está ahí, de pie, silencioso y conmovido; ahora que, por fin, se atreve a mirarla de nuevo, frente a frente, y a través del mismo

risible parpadeo que le conoció de niño en sus momentos de emoción, ahora ella comprende. Comprende que en ella dormía, agazapado, aquel amor que presumió muerto. Que aquel ser nunca le fué totalmente ajeno. (29-30)

Through the *limen* phase, she resolves “el enigma,” the internal conflict of being abandoned by Antonio. In her previous living state, she could not understand the reason for his abandonment nor his feelings toward her. Yet, in this transitional phase, she reexamines her relationship and concludes that he has always loved her.

The second benefit of liminality is that Ana María can explore her memories from a more objective perspective now that she does not have social expectations associated with her identity from the previous living state. Due to her recent death, she does not retain previous responsibilities as a woman or wife. Liminality after her death provides “...the opportunity to see herself without all of the social and emotional expectations and labels that have heretofore defined her”, no longer enduring the pressure from her family and friends (Wilkinson 86). The main character expresses directly, “No recuerda haber gozado, haber agotado nunca, así, una emoción. Tantos seres, tantas preocupaciones y pequeños estorbos físicos se interponían

siempre entre ella y el secreto de una noche. Ahora, en cambio, no la turba ningún pensamiento inoportuno” (Bombal 8-9). Here, she presents the external pressures on her romantic desires, especially in the context of her sexual relationship with Ricardo outside of marriage.

The narration in this state of liminality reveals that the social pressures have altered her experiences, but now in the present preparation for burial, she reconsiders them. The liberty of reexamining her memories is again demonstrated through the memory of when Ana María did not kiss Antonio. She reconsiders the additional influences of other people and her own response:

...en aquella tarde gris en que su padre le había dicho: “Chiquilla, abraza a tu novio”. Entonces ella se había acercado obediente a ese hombre tan arrogante...y tan rico, se había empujado para besar su mejilla. Recordaba que al apartarse, la habían impresionado el rostro grave de la abuela y las manos temblorosas de su padre...Y haber sentido asimismo la solicitud con que la habían rodeado durante tantos años. Y no; ya no era capaz sino de evocar el temor que se había apoderado de ella a partir de ese instante, la angustia que crecía con los días y el obstinado silencio de Ricardo.



Pero ¿cómo volver sobre una mentira? ¿Cómo decir que se había casado por despecho? (66-67)

In the memory, she notes that she was afraid because she felt trapped in her marriage. This is evident when she realizes that Antonio is not interested in her, her family requires marriage, and Ricardo does not intervene in the situation. At the end of the liminal phase, it appears that she realizes that Antonio is not a horrible or boring person, but the pressure of the family and her feelings influenced her perspective on the marriage. By having time and space in the new liminal phase to reflect, she discerns how her feelings and the additional stresses have affected past situations. During the burial of Ana María, Antonio visits her and cries. While Ana María is dead, she notes that her anger towards him decrease:

A medida que las lágrimas brotan, se deslizan, caen, ella siente su odio retraerse, evaporarse. No, ya no odia[...] Pero tampoco lo ama. Y he aquí que al dejar de amarlo y de odiarlo siente deshacerse el último nudo de estructura vital. Nada le importa ya. Es como si no tuviera ya razón de ser ni ella ni su pasado. Un gran hastío la cerca, se siente tambalear hacia atrás. ¡Oh esta súbita rebeldía! Este deseo que la atormenta

de incorporarse gimiendo: “Quiero vivir. ¡Devuélvanme, devuélvanme mi odio!” (78)

This scene of her liminal phase shows that she longs to take back her previous feelings towards Antonio, wishing to return to life. However, the past has already begun to lose its influence as she transitions to the final phase of her rite of passage, aggregation with the buried dead.

## Conclusion

Throughout *La amortajada*, the protagonist, Ana María, experiences a rite of a passage from death to burial. The three phases, separation, *limen*, and aggregation, result in physical, emotional, and mental changes. She is first separated from society and her previous state through her physical death. She then enters the *limen* phase where she is dead but not buried. The past identities from her life as living, such as wife, mother, and lover no longer match with her current status and she is unable to interact with the living. In addition, she does not have the state of dead because she remains unburied, observing the living. Liminality allows Ana María to observe her family and lovers, switching from the present wake to her previous memories. With this ability, she reflects on her previous state as living and expresses her emotions without the physical,

emotional, and societal limitations from when she was alive. She is also able to see the memories from her previous state from a more objective perspective because the pressures of societal expectations as a woman are not influential. The *limen* phase ends at the burial. Ana María's state changes from a transitional state to a member of the buried dead who are connected with nature. This final scene is the beginning of the last phase of a rite, aggregation, where she finally gains all the attributes of the new state, the buried dead.

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