RÉQUIEM POR UN CAMPESINO ESPAÑOL

Ramón J. Sender (1953)
Requiem for a Spanish Peasant (Réquiem por un campesino español) is a famous short novel in twentieth-century Spanish literature by Spanish writer Ramón J. Sender. It relates the thoughts and memories of Mosén Millán, a Catholic parish priest, as he sits in the vestry of a church in a nameless Aragonese village, preparing to conduct a requiem mass to celebrate the life of a young peasant named Paco killed by the Nationalist army a year earlier, at the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War. As he waits, his thoughts are interrupted by the occasional comings and goings of an altar boy, who hums to himself an anonymous ballad.

The novel was originally published under the title Mosén Millán; however, the author changed the title to shift the focus from the priest to its peasant protagonist.

The story, concise and of extreme sobriety, tells us with an atmosphere of tense calm the most important events of the life of Paco el Molino, as well as the intrigue, revenge, fear and anger to which he is submitted. This life, in the words of Sender himself, “Is simply the outline of our entire civil war, where people who considered themselves revolutionary only defended the feudal rights of a tradition already outdated in the rest of the world.”

However, this story is no more than an excuse to show the reality, the true story, where we see the political commitment of the author is showing two opposing ideologies. Despite the fear and convulsive events they evoke, everything is narrated with extreme structural simplicity in an atmosphere devoid of nightmares but not of sobriety and tranquility, remorse and perhaps even repentance and hypocrisy. Undoubtedly a complex but essential work of Spanish literature.

Paco is the protagonist of the novel, classic, tragic, pure, sincere and, perhaps, somewhat idealistic. The example, the leader in the struggle, the most beloved of the people, but the true protagonist and narrator of the story is Mosen Millán.
The parish priest reminds us of Paco’s life in stages, in each fragment he recalls events in Paco’s life from his childhood to his death, for which he is largely responsible. It is precisely this responsibility, this discomfort, this terrible burden, that is endured for having betrayed him, which further shapes the social reality of the time, which is being described and gradually discovered with great narrative mastery.

During the novel, the testimonies of other characters (Águeda, Paco’s father, altar boy or La Jerónima) and the attendants to the requiem (Don Valeriano, don Gumersindo and Don Cástulo) carried out by Mosén Millán highlight him as even more guilty of the tragedy. The feeling of guilt that persecutes him and that shamelessly manifests itself in the ceremony, reveals the misery and division in which Spain was plunged.

Precisely, the novel is, from the beginning, the thread of reflections, concerns and regrets of the parish priest and the feelings that assault him, as well as the self-justifications he seeks to lighten his moral burden for his responsibility in Paco’s death.

The priest of the town symbolizes and represents the whole of the Church, in a harsh criticism of the role that it adopted during the pre-war and Spanish Civil War (hence the inaction before the death of Paco and the lack of commitment of the priest). In the novel Mosén Millán preaches resignation and humility, accept the ups and downs of life and turns the other cheek. In this way he tries to explain to Paco that the extreme poverty of those who live in the caves is not really so serious if one thinks of the spiritual miseries to which they are exposed and, finally, also tries that to get Paco to accept his death and resign. This attitude reflects a fierce criticism where the author’s way of thinking and ideology can be seen with extreme clarity.

The narrative, from the point of view of Mosén Millán is sincere and even tender sometimes. The role that he plays in the story hardly comes to light completely until the climax of the novel, where it narrates the treachery of the priest of the town towards Paco.
MAIN THEMES AND QUESTIONS

Religion

1. Analyse the role of Mosén Millán in the novel
2. Analyse this statement: “The moral strength of a villager is greater than that of the parish priest.”

Symbolism

1. Analyse the most important symbols in the book.
2. Comment on this statement: “The donkey is one of the most important symbols in the novel.”

Attitudes during the Spanish Civil War

1. Why are the land owners so afraid of Paco?
2. Analyse this statement: “The real tragedy of Mosén Millán is that he’s a coward.”

Death

1. Analyse this statement: “Paco is dead but his spirit commands the novel.”
2. Analyse this statement: “In Paco, idealism overcomes pragmatism”

REFERENCES

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