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## Fantasy Married to Metaphor

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# Fantasy Married to Metaphor

*Kelly Fischer*

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“The only way to deal with an unfree world,” claimed Albert Camus, “is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion.” Few countries have struggled so long for freedom as Spain, and few characters demonstrate freedom of the mind in an oppressive situation as well as Ofelia does in the film *Pan’s Labyrinth*. For many years Spain struggled under various oppressive dictatorships. Her First Republic lasted only from 1873 to 1874 and her second from 1931 until 1936, when Spain dissolved into civil war. Ofelia was born along with the Second Republic in 1931, but by the age of 13 she had witnessed the dissolution of the Republic and the rise of an oppressive dictatorship under General Francisco Franco. *Pan’s Labyrinth* traces Ofelia’s fictional life in the aftermath of the Spanish Civil War and her encounter with the fantastical which serves as her escape from the harsh rule of her step-father Captain Vidal. However, *Pan’s Labyrinth* is more than a tale of freedom of the imagination in hopeless circumstances. Instead, the film and its characters serve as accurate metaphors for the Spanish Civil War and life under the subsequent dictatorship.

Ofelia struggles under the oppressive rule of her step-father Captain Vidal, who represents General Francisco Franco. Vidal is similar to Franco in his violent way of dealing with the resistance. Franco was a merciless dictator who dealt harshly with his opposition in the name of efficiency. Although the full extent of his atrocities remains unknown, many examples of his ruthlessness exist, such as the murder by machine gun of hundreds, if not thousands, of Republicans in the town of Badajoz by Franco’s troops. Furthermore, tens of thousands of political prisoners were executed during Franco’s thirty-one year reign (“Francisco Franco”). Similarly, Captain Vidal shows himself equally unlikely to demonstrate mercy. His crimes,

as viewed in the movie, include the murder of two rabbit-hunters whom he suspects to be Republican guerrilla fighters, the torture of the stuttering Republican his troops capture, and finally the murder of his own step-daughter. On a smaller scale, Vidal shows himself to be just as remorseless as Franco.

Some people might argue that these similarities between Vidal and Franco are coincidental, as both were commanders in a harsh war. However, they resemble each other in many more ways. Besides his cruelty, Vidal's most notable characteristic is his obsession with time. He is constantly and compulsively checking his watch and insists upon the punctuality of those around him. This preoccupation represents Franco's obsessive control of the epoch he rules, and his fear that it will slip away from him (Deaver). As a fascist dictator, Franco desired complete control of the entire country, as seen by the institution of a secret police force and severe censorship of the media. He is just as obsessed with control as Vidal. Another way in which Vidal represents Franco is his demand of mindless obedience. Few things upset Vidal more than when people thought for themselves or disobeyed his orders, such as when the doctor euthanized the stuttering prisoner or Mercedes persisted in helping the rebels. Even minor events, such as Ofelia placing a mandrake under Carmen's bed, could launch Vidal into a rage. This demand for mindless obedience is characteristic of fascism, particularly fascism in Spain under Franco's rule. Vidal's final moments are also reminiscent of Franco at the end of his life. Vidal, seeing that his death is imminent and inevitable, makes no effort to defend himself or die bravely. He makes no attempt to ensure that some vestige of his power will remain when his life ends, but instead requests only to be remembered. William Deaver suggests that this cowardly death "foreshadows the fatalistic stoicism of Franco on his death bed as he prescribed the transition of power" (163, translation mine). At the end of his life Franco did not try to perpetuate his style of dictatorship, but instead peacefully handed over the rule of Spain to Prince Juan Carlos, who would eventually reinstate democracy.

Franco's reign was also marked by the inhumane treatment of those under him, a fact that Pan's Labyrinth makes clear from the beginning. In the opening lines we are told about "a princess who

dreamed of the human world.” According to Deaver, the princess dreaming of the human world “insinuates that the latent significance is that the world under Franco is inhuman” (156, translation mine). The fact that the princess is from the underground realm also signifies that the guerrilla fighters, who metaphorically move underground, are the ones who possess true humanity. The guerrilla fighters are shown as a group of people who freely choose to fight for what they believe in despite the severe consequences they face. The risks they take to care for each other, such as Mercedes providing them food and medicine, sharply contrasts with the Captain’s selfishness and disregard for those around him. Thus the film suggests Franco’s rule was inhumane and those who resisted him were the ones who kept humanity and love intact.

The film also emphasizes that Franco’s promise to bring prosperity to the people of Spain was never fulfilled. According to Nadia Hajji, “400,000 people were subjected to forced labor, torture, prison time, or internment camps.” These people were not partaking in any promised prosperity. Furthermore, Spain was the most closed economy in Western Europe, benefiting very little from international trade (“History”). According to a 1951 newspaper article, Spain has never “been so poverty-stricken as now, under the Franco regime” (“Poverty”). In fact, the same article stated that under Franco the average Spanish worker was only “half as well off as he was before the civil war” (“Poverty”). The promise of prosperity is demonstrated in the film as Vidal’s soldiers guarding the storehouse proclaim that “in the nationalist Spain...there is no place without fire nor a family without bread.” However, several other scenes disprove this litany. First, the murdered rabbit-hunters serve as an example of hunger and desperation. When Vidal orders Mercedes to make rabbit soup with the rabbits taken from the hunters, she discovers that the rabbits are young and skinny, the type of creature that no person would hunt unless they were starving. Secondly, Ofelia is presented with a feast that she cannot eat in the pale man’s lair. In this instance, Ofelia represents the people of Spain who are starving while the few and the powerful, such as Franco and his henchmen, live in luxury. Prosperity was promised to the people of Spain, and prosperity was even a reality for a select few, but the average man struggled to sustain himself as he watched those living in luxury from a distance.

Ofelia also symbolizes Spain's Second Republic. Ofelia is 13 in the movie, which suggests that she was born in 1931, the year the Second Republic began and the former monarchical dictatorship ended. Therefore, "she is the figure of the Second Republic incarnate that helps Spain to pass through a deficient monarchy to the present democracy" (Deaver 161). However, Ofelia did not live to witness the lasting democracy. Instead, in the same way that Franco crushed the Second Republic, Vidal murders her. Fortunately, this defeat does not mean that Spain is without hope. Pan's Labyrinth ends by saying of Ofelia, "And it is said that the Princess returned to her father's kingdom. That she reigned there with justice and a kind heart for many centuries. That she was loved by her people. And that she left behind small traces of her time on Earth, visible only to those who know where to look." This demonstrates that although the Republic was physically absent from Spain, its spirit still remained in the hearts of the people. However, the evidence of the ideals of the Republic was hidden "underground" among those who resisted Franco and clung to the hope that one day democracy would return and reign forever.

In the same way that Ofelia represents the Second Republic, Ofelia's mother, Carmen, represents Spain and the struggle she endured under Franco's rule. Carmen, formerly free and happily married to a common man, endures a difficult pregnancy under the rule of a demanding and unloving husband. Similarly, Spain had experienced a time of being governed democratically by the people during the Second Republic, but was now suffering under Franco's harsh rule. Ofelia attempts to heal her mother by placing a mandrake under her bed which, according to Deaver, represents "on a spiritual level, the healing liberation of humanity in order to eliminate the evils of life under an oppressive dictator" (160, translation mine). However, the evils of life under an oppressive dictator cannot be removed without removing the dictator himself, and Vidal destroys the mandrake, sending Carmen into agony. This pain, coupled with the mandrake's scream, "suggests the agony that Spain would suffer without the humanity" that democracy would provide (Deaver 161, translation mine).

The birth of Ofelia's younger brother, who Carmen suffered so greatly to deliver, represents the birth of a democratic Spain. Carmen dies giving birth, possibly symbolizing the end of Spain's history of

sickness and suffering, and leaves in her place a new, innocent child. The birth of Ofelia's brother is followed very shortly by the death of Vidal, symbolizing the end of Franco and his reign of terror. The child is left in the care of the common people who value the ability to make choices and choose their future. Similarly, shortly after the death of Franco Spain will be restored to democratic rule and once again the government will be run by officials of the people's own choosing. Furthermore, before Vidal's death, Mercedes tells him that the child "will not even know your name." Spain was given a chance to start anew, unstained by the memory of Franco's atrocities.

Ofelia's brother not knowing Vidal's name is also significant because it represents the years following Franco's reign when Spain chose to ignore Franco's countless crimes. For a long time after Franco's death, the democracy was so fragile that in 1977 officials passed the Amnesty Law, pardoning all political crimes committed during the Spanish Civil War (Hajji 84). The law was passed in order to ensure that the democracy would not be threatened in the investigations and arrests that otherwise would have ensued. To maintain stability, not only were war criminals pardoned, but "[r]ather than speak openly about the Franco regime's crimes, Spain adhered to an unspoken Pacto del Silencio or Pacto de Olvido" (Hajji 84). This strategy was effective in that it strengthened the democracy, but it also left many questions unanswered and many people longing for justice. Therefore, in October of 2007 the Historical Memory Law was passed by Spain's parliament. This law "recognized each person's right to...investigate crimes pertaining directly to one's family," and thus began the process of justice in Spain (Hajji 85). However, Pan's Labyrinth was produced in 2006, a year before the law was passed. Therefore, when the film asserts that democratic Spain will not know the name and crimes of her former oppressors, this assertion was accurate based on the knowledge available at that time.

In addition to symbolizing people or periods in Spain's history through the use of its characters, the film also demonstrates several aspects of life under fascist rule. One facet of fascism that the movie emphasizes is the relationship between fascism and choices. Fascism was a regime that did not offer those ruled by it a great degree of freedom to choose. However, against this stark background of determinism, Guillermo del Toro, the director of Pan's Labyrinth, wanted to use the film to explore "the way your choices define you"

(Kermode, "Girl"). He also said he "thought it would be great to counterpoint an institutional lack of choice, which is fascism, with the chance to choose which the girl takes in this movie" (Kermode, "Girl"). Ofelia's choice to sacrifice herself rather than spill the blood of her brother certainly demonstrates her character and her ability to rise above the culture she has grown up in. Similarly, the doctor's choice to euthanize the stutterer and Mercedes' choice to live as a spy in Vidal's household demonstrate the importance of making your own choices. In the doctor's words to Captain Vidal, "But captain, to obey, just like that, for obedience's sake... without questioning... That's something only people like you do." This statement by the doctor implies that only the avaricious and cruel will mindlessly obey orders without considering the morality of their actions. The free choices of these three characters also foreshadow the coming of the democracy, when all the people in Spain will be given a chance to choose.

In addition to lack of choice, Pan's Labyrinth emphasizes the contrast between the rightist and leftist ideologies. During this period in Spain, the rightist group was known as the Nationalists and was comprised of the Roman Catholic Church, large landowners, and significant portions of the military. Their ideology was a mixture of traditional Spanish values and fascist principles and they greatly distrusted nontraditional systems such as communism. The leftist group, known as the Republicans, was largely made up of urban workers, agricultural laborers, and much of the middle class ("Civil War," World). Most members of this group supported socialism or communism and received support from the Soviet Union. Pan's Labyrinth symbolizes the dichotomy between the two groups on a number of occasions. When Ofelia first meets Vidal, she holds out her left hand to shake his. He responds by saying, "It's the other hand, Ofelia," before turning away from her. The occurrence demonstrates that Ofelia is symbolically a member of the leftist group, and shows Vidal's (or Franco's) complete disregard to anyone ideologically opposed to him. The film also alludes to leftist ideology when Ofelia is searching for the dagger in the pale man's lair. She was instructed that the key would open the center compartment, but she ignores the instructions and instead discovers it on the left. The dagger's location on the left suggests that the solution to Spain's problems could not be found in rightist ideology, or even a centrist point of

view, but could only be found in the beliefs of the Republicans.

Finally, the rose, which was a powerful symbol of immortality in the film, is also the symbol of the Spanish Socialist Workers Party (PSOE), a faction of the Republicans. The PSOE was a leftist party whose members demonstrated various degrees of extremism. The party held a significant portion of power before the Spanish Civil War, but was outlawed under Franco's regime. The party was once again legalized when Spain became democratic in 1977. The rose is a common symbol among socialist groups. Its red color is said to represent the struggle against "physical poverty", and its form as a flower symbolizes the struggle against "spiritual poverty" (Grandqvist). The dual symbolism of the rose in Pan's Labyrinth and in the real world suggests that the film utilized the rose to imply that the Republican forces would bring lasting peace and prosperity to Spain.

Through the use of symbolism, director Guillermo del Toro is able to use his film Pan's Labyrinth as an accurate metaphor for the Spanish Civil War and life under the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco. Spain and her people experienced many severe trials during this period, but was able to overcome them and see the birth of a new and lasting democracy. Spain's escape from the stifling ideology of fascism is a testament to human resiliency and the power of hope to guide people through the darkest of circumstances.

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