

**ROOM
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EXHIBITION
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RODOREDA,
A FOREST

This document includes the exhibition texts.
It is written according to Easy Read guidelines
to make it easier to understand.

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RODOREDA, A FOREST: THE EXHIBITION

“Rodoreda, a Forest” is an exhibition about the imagination of Catalan author Mercè Rodoreda. In this exhibition, we’ll learn about the main themes of her books. These topics are connected to each other, like the branches and roots of a tree.

Rodoreda’s literature is deep and special. That’s why we’ll explore her imagination, full of ideas that connect with each other as if they were trees in a forest.

Certain ideas come up in several of Rodoreda’s books. Characters spy on others, watch their surroundings, feel desire, witness death, drown or are transformed.

Rodoreda’s stories and novels have houses with gardens and houses without gardens, as well as streets and squares. But above all, there are lots of plants and flowers.

Rodoreda loved gardens, and saw flowers as much more than flowers. In the books she wrote, flowers are words and symbols.

Each flower can have a different meaning in each book.
And often, these flowers
remind us of other great works of world literature.

Mercè Rodoreda i Gurguï was born in Barcelona in 1908
and died in Girona in 1983.

One of the most celebrated writers in Catalan literature,
she is especially famous for

In Diamond Square and *A Broken Mirror*.

A few years ago, her novel *Death in Spring*
was republished and was very successful.

Rodoreda uses beautiful, easy-to-understand words
to write about deep issues.

She writes about childhood and cruelty,
and also about beauty and horror.

Her writing style can be
childish and horrific or realistic and fantastic.

When we read Mercè Rodoreda's novels,
we understand every word,
but we don't always see the symbols behind these words.
She uses simple words
to explore very deep and important ideas.

Her books are full of details, images and emotions.
They are also
deeply connected to literary traditions.

Sometimes people think there are just 2 different Rodoredas:
the Rodoreda who talks about her childhood surrounded by gardens
and the Rodoreda who tells scary forest stories.
If we read her books carefully, we see that
these 2 ideas always go together.

This balance between the gardens of childhood
and the forests of horror
give Mercè Rodoreda's novels
a special beauty.

Nature is a key theme in her books.
It is a memory of childhood, but it also has other meanings.

Nature is a way of talking about desire, suicide,
the feeling that you don't belong anywhere,
constant humiliation and the meaning of life.

This exhibition explains
Mercè Rodoreda's literature in a new way,
through artists who are celebrating
the author's literary imagination.

A star of Catalan literature?

Mercè Rodoreda is one of the most celebrated and well-known Catalan authors in the world. Her novels have been translated into 40 languages, but it took her a long time to become famous.

In 1980, she was the first woman to receive the Catalan Literary Lifetime Achievement Award, and many Catalan and international researchers have studied her works.

But for many years, some readers saw her as a somewhat old-fashioned author. They only focused on her appearance: an old lady, with white hair, surrounded by flowers and always thinking about gardens.

This idea of Mercè Rodoreda was due to the sexism of the time. A lot of people criticised her way of life. Some people talked about her without having read any of her books. They had only seen the 1982 film version of *In Diamond Square*.

In addition, many of Mercè Rodoreda's books were compulsory reading in secondary school. As a result, many students thought her writing style was somewhat exaggerated.

Even today, on social media, many people make it sound as if she only wrote about flowers and gardens.

Now, Mercè Rodoreda has become a kind of pop music star: people share images of her and quotes from her writing without truly appreciating everything behind her books.

INNOCENT NARRATORS

The narrators of Mercè Rodoreda's books are innocent.
These narrators can be
adolescents, young people or elderly,
but they always see the world through pure eyes.

For example, narrators include
Natàlia in *Diamond Square*,
Cecília in *Camellia Street*,
a nameless boy in *Death in Spring*
and an old gardener in *Garden By the Sea*.

At the start of *In Diamond Square*,
Rodoreda says that seeing the world through the eyes of a child
doesn't mean being stupid; it means being able to marvel at everything.

She says this in defence of Colometa,
the protagonist of *In Diamond Square*,
because many people think she's not that smart.

Sometimes, the narrators of Mercè Rodoreda's books
don't understand what's going on.
Readers need to think a little
to figure out what exactly they mean.

The author uses this innocent perspective
to teaches us beautiful things
and also very hard things,
but without judgement.

These narrators are like cameras
who see everything and tell us everything,
from tenderness to cruelty.

Gardens: flowers and thorns

For Mercè Rodoreda, innocence
is not just about childhood,
and gardens are not always perfect or cheerful places.

In her books, flowers are beautiful,
but they can also be poisonous,
and are found near scary, dark forests.

In her novels,
childhood can also be scary:
some children are innocent, but some children are cruel,
because they hurt those who are different.



▲ Feliu Elias
Portrait of Mariona Pagès Elias
1916
Oil on canvas
Rosa Regàs Collection
Photograph: Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya

For example, her stories include characters such as
2 children who kill their little brother in a garden pond
and keep the secret,
a child who wants to hurt a baby,
and a girl who sets papers on fire to burn her ears.

Rodoreda imagines many scary childhoods,
but in interviews,
she looks like a grandmother who is still a girl at heart,
and who misses the neighbourhood where she lived as a child:
the neighbourhood of Sant Gervasi de Cassoles,
and the gardens of her childhood that no longer exist.

Through the eyes of a child

What does it mean to grow up?

Many of Rodoreda's stories explore this question.

They are similar to European novels where young people learn to live, but they are also different in major ways.

Rodoreda's young characters don't adapt to society.

They don't want to follow the rules or please others.

They want to expose adults' lies.

For Mercè Rodoreda, integrating into society means losing your desire, letting others change who you are or losing the way you see the world.

Her protagonists are innocent and rebellious at the same time.

They rebel by

continuing to be kind when they grow up

and seeing the world as children do.

Characters who want to stop living

Mercè Rodoreda sees
suicide as the ultimate rebellion.

In her books,
many of the characters who commit suicide
are young people who do not want to live in a violent world
or bear the burden of family secrets:

- In the novel *A Broken Mirror*,
Maria jumps off a balcony and is impaled by a laurel tree.
- In the short story *Friday, 8 June*,
a mother who has been **raped**,
drowns herself with her baby in a river.
- In the novel *Camellia Street*,
the protagonist, whose name is Cecília,
survives after trying to kill herself.
- During the Second World War,
Mercè Rodoreda wore the coat of a Jewish girl
who had committed suicide by taking poison.
- In her story *The Fate of Lisa Sperling*,
she recounts the final moments of this girl's life.
- In *Journey to the Village of the Hanged*,
we see the bodies of men
who were so obsessed with fatherhood
that they ended up killing themselves to stop having children.

Raped means
that she was
sexually assaulted.

Suicide can be a way to free oneself from desire.

DESIRE

Desire is a secret force that turns bodies into magnets.
We see it in people who cheat on their partners.
Rodoreda depicts love as a rose full of thorns:
difficult and hurtful.

Her characters experience abusive relationships,
where one person is in charge and the other has to obey.
Rodoreda immediately sees
that romantic love is a lie.

She explains it as if it were children's story,
but it's a scary story:
women suffer in their relationships with men.



◀ Francesc Carrera Bou
Vase with flowers
Between 1922 and 1926
Exhibition copy, 2025
Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya,
Barcelona.
Víctor Carrera Collection, 2006
© Museu d'Art de Catalunya,
Barcelona, 2025

There are all kinds of characters in Mercè Rodoreda's stories:
abusive husbands,
men who like to **spy on** women,
men who commit rape.

Spying means
watching secretly.

But her books also show
good men who want to care for others,
men who believe in love,
caring fathers, shy men,
and protective men who cannot have children.



▲ Francesc Carrera Bou
Vase with flowers
Between 1922 and 1926
Exhibition copy, 2025
Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona.
Víctor Carrera Collection, 2006
© Museu d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, 2025

Mercè Rodoreda also writes about girls.
In her novels, there are
innocent girls and also bad girls,
mothers who do not love their children
and old women who defend the rules
that only benefit men.

The author wants to break the rules about
how women are supposed to behave.
She reinvents the idea of female beauty.
She shows that women are not just pretty flowers
and she treats witches and prostitutes fairly.

Her books connect with literary classics
and male characters from these classics,
such as Othello, Ulysses and Narcissus.



◀ Suzanne Valadon
Nu assis sur un canapé
[Nude on a sofa]
1916
Oil on canvas
Weismann & Michel Collection,
Palm Beach, United States

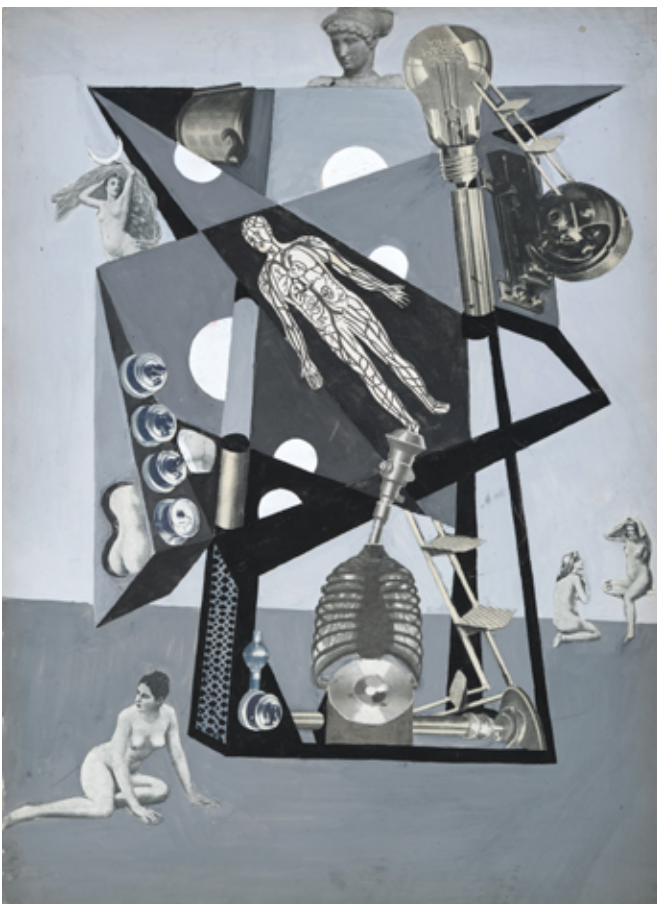
Spying

Characters in Mercè Rodoreda's works often spy on others.
Children hide to watch what adults are doing.

There are also men who spy on women
because they like to watch them in secret.
And there are rich gentlemen who like to watch sexual shows
at venues on Carrer Paral·lel in Barcelona.

In her books,
Rodoreda describes how some people,
such as men who see women's bodies as objects,
can hurt someone just by the way they look at them.
Women must accept being looked at in this way.

Desire remains in the eyes of the spy:
peeping through a keyhole,
behind a curtain, or among the trees.



◀ Remedios Varo
Morphologie géométrique
[Geometric morphology]
1935
Collage and mixed media on cardboard
Courtesy of Galerie Boquet, Paris
© Remedios Varo, VEGAP,
Barcelona 2025

Not-so-romantic loves

Rodoreda believes that falling in love is a strange game.
Seducing someone means making them listen to you.
The first nights after the wedding are sometimes painful.

In fact, many people marry for convenience.
They might get married to have basic things, such as food.
That's what happens in the novel *In Diamond Square*,
with Colometa and her second husband.
Other times, people get married to have more money
or a better life.

Mercè Rodoreda also writes about women
who fall in love with married men.
These men tell their lovers
“I only have eyes for you.”
But they're lying.

The women are upset that these men are married.
We see this with characters such as
the Salamander, Cecília and Aloma.
For example, Aloma becomes an outcast
after a relative gets her pregnant.



◀ Laia Abril
Femicides
Exhibition copies, 2025
Courtesy of the artist

Rodoreda said that *In Diamond Square* and *Death in Spring* are love novels. But what kind of love do they describe? Maybe a pure and sincere love, where both people are equals, and where no one uses sex to hurt the other.

Colometa from *In Diamond Square* learns to love her second husband, a man who cannot have sex or children because of the war.

Similarly, the boy from *Death in Spring* feel a deep, sincere love when he looks at a **water woman**.

A **dona d'aigua**, or water woman, is a mythological being similar to a river fairy.



▲ Toni Catany
Still Life No. 186. "Still lifes" series
1991
Exhibition copy, 2025
Toni Catany Foundation, Lluçmajor
Photo: Toni Catany. Still Life No. 186, 1991. © Toni Catany Foundation

Does your mother love you?

Rodoreda writes a lot about women's sexuality:
their first period, their loss of virginity,
the sex they want or don't want,
unwanted pregnancies,
childbirth, breastfeeding,
abortions and **menopause**.

From the point of view of her characters,
everything seems strange and mysterious:
blood, breast milk,
umbilical cords, belly buttons falling off.

Abortion

means stopping
a pregnancy before
the baby is born.

Menopause is when a
woman stops having
her period.



▲ María Blanchard
Nude-Woman with Children
1924-1925
Oil on canvas
FAMM (Female Artists of the Mougins Museum)
France/The Levett Collection, France

The characters in Mercè Rodoreda's books find that it's hard to be a mother.

Even a mother who loves her baby very much can hurt her baby.

Rich women spend a lot of time on their appearance and don't always have time to take care of their children.

For example, the protagonist of *A Broken Mirror* is called Teresa.

She asks her son:

"Does your mother love you?"

Her son thinks she's his godmother, but she's actually his mother.

Family relationships are very important in Mercè Rodoreda's works.

Many of her characters do not know who their parents are.

This means that, in small towns or in some families, these characters may accidentally end up being in a romantic relationship with a relative.



◀ Renate Eisenegger
Isolamento
Photograph No. 7 in an 8-part series
1972
On paper Hahnemühle FineArt Pearl
Exhibition copy, 2025
Renate Eisenegger/Verbund Collection,
Vienna

Laughing at others

In Rodoreda's stories,
the norms of society punish desire,
and they do so publicly, in front of everyone,
even in front of children, so that they
will learn what is right and what is wrong.
Everyone watches the punishment.

There is a desire to hurt others and watch them die.
Rodoreda tells us these stories from the victim's perspective,
and this makes readers uncomfortable.

For example,
in her story *The Salamander*, a person is burned in a bonfire,
and in her novel *Death in Spring*,
a man is killed in the town square.

His neighbours watch him die.
Bad people have the desire
to declare other people guilty and punish them.

And witches are particularly hated
because they are powerful:
they don't follow the laws of men
and they can make what they say come true.



▲ Bego Antón
Haiek Danak Sorginak [All Of Them Witches]
2021
Reproduction, 2025
Courtesy of the artist
© Bego Anton, 2025

SO MUCH WAR!

Mercè Rodoreda was a **refugee** and experienced many challenges. That's why, in her stories, war isn't just fighting on the battlefield; it's also being far from home every day.

She writes about people who have to put themselves first in order to survive. She doesn't write about war heroes, but she always shows the blood, the corpses and the horses wounded as a result of the war.

These are the horrors she saw when she fled Paris because of the Nazi occupation.

The main theme in Mercè Rodoreda's mature novels is having lived through the war.

Her stories include character such as a lost young man escaping from war, a girl soldier raped by other soldiers, a child who leaves his family and goes to a foster home to be able to eat. But most of all, there is hunger, a lot of hunger.

Another story describes a strange village of insect women: women abandoned by their husbands who never came back from the war.

A refugee

is a person who flees their country to escape persecution and arrest.

The revolution

Mercè Rodoreda writes a lot about the Spanish Civil War and calls it a “revolution”.

And the Republic reminds her of a fresh breeze, like spring, but one that will never return.

In Diamond Square is the novel that talks the most about the war. It describes the bombings and the men who go to war, the blue lights on the lampposts to defend against military aircraft, the girls dressed as soldiers, the rich gentlemen disguised as workers and the abandoned children.

Mercè Rodoreda didn't see herself as a reporter. She wasn't interested in writing history. But historical events are part of *In Diamond Square*. She wrote history without meaning to; it was simply part of the burden she bore. That's what she says at the start of *War, So Much War*, a novel about war where there is actually not much war. In it, the towns in the Ebro region become increasingly strange.

Rodoreda wrote:

“I'm not that interested in my historical period; I know it all too well.”

She lived through war and exile. Because of her political views in favour of Catalonia and the Republic, and her work for the Catalan government, she could not live in Catalonia during the dictatorship. She thought she would return soon, but she ended up living abroad for over 30 years. She did not return until after Franco's death.

A river of dead bodies

In *Death in Spring*,
some residents of the village perform a strange ceremony.
They jump into the river to see if the water will wash away the village.
When they come out, they will be either dead or faceless.

Perhaps “the faceless men”
are like the soldiers
who came back from the First World War
with disfigured faces.
Rodoreda mixes historical events from the 3 wars
that took place in Europe during her lifetime.

Her novel *War, So Much War*
is written in separate episodes
to show that the horror of war
is a chaos that is impossible to explain.

Shortly before she died,
Mercè Rodoreda wrote the story “The Station”,
where ghosts who don’t know they’re dead
are waiting for a train that will never come.



◀ Mercè Rodoreda at Villa Rosset, Roissy-en-Brie
1939
Exhibition copy, 2025
Institute of Catalan Studies
Mercè Rodoreda Foundation, Barcelona

Night and Fog

Mercè Rodoreda's story "Night and Fog" describes some of the horrors that took place during the Second World War.

The title comes from laws passed by the Nazis in 1941 to eliminate all the people who fought against them.

In the story, Mercè Rodoreda describes things that happened long before many people knew about them:
the arrival at the labour camps,
the gas chambers, the abuse,
the corpses in the barracks
and the way the Nazis dehumanised people.

It's surprising that Rodoreda wrote about these horrors in Europe so soon after they took place.

Based on her letters,
we believe she wrote this story in Bordeaux,
between 1945 and 1946,
before Primo Levi, Amat-Piniella and Robert Antelme wrote their works about the concentration camps.

Mercè Rodoreda's story "Night and Fog" was first published in 1947 in *La Nostra Revista* magazine, in Mexico. In Catalonia, the story was published in 1978, in the collection *It Looked Like Silk and Other Stories*.

Hunger, so much hunger...

Rodoreda describes the violence of war as well as violence against animals, placing them on the same level.

It shows us that the blood of soldiers and the blood of the animals we eat are both worth the same and look the same.

This reminds us of the artist Goya, who depicted war as senseless violence.

In her story “Guinea Fowl”, Rodoreda, like Goya, shows us the suffering of the poultry sold at market. Humans kill one after the other. “So much war” should really be “So much hunger”.

In the novel *War, So Much War*, Mercè Rodoreda tells the story of a boy fleeing war who just wants to survive and find food.

Rodoreda tells the story of the Spanish Civil War through the 16th- and 17th-century literature of the Spanish Golden Age. The protagonist looks like the famous character Lazarillo de Tormes: he is innocent, hungry and must fend for himself. There’s also a scene in which a knight tells him a secret, reminding readers of *Don Quixote*.

War, So Much War is, above all,
a novel about hunger,
but there is a surprising scene:
a huge banquet at a soldiers' wedding,
making readers think of books by French writer François Rabelais.

Rodoreda also often uses humour,
and has fun with the classics,
even the story of *Hänsel and Gretel*.

HOUSES AND STREETS

Rodoreda lived alone in exile in Geneva.
Sometimes she also visited Paris.
She missed Barcelona and imagined its streets.
She remembered how everything changed when Franco came to power,
destroying the city.

In Switzerland, Mercè Rodoreda hardly heard Catalan,
but used the language to write the stories she imagined.
She imagined the life of the Catalans
who stayed in Barcelona after the war.
She wrote about Barcelona before the war,
during the war and after the war.

She described all the parts of the city she remembered:
the rooftops and humble flats of Gràcia,
the fancy apartments of the Eixample and their secrets,
the shacks on Montjuïc,
a field of carnations in Sarrià,
the dancers on Paral·lel,
the Liceu with its beautiful light
and a tower in Sant Gervasi that was destroyed
and turned into modern flats.



◀ Mercè Rodoreda,
in a light-coloured coat,
strolling through Lausanne
with Armand Obiols
Undated
Exhibition copy, 2025
Institute of Catalan Studies
Mercè Rodoreda Foundation,
Barcelona

Mercè Rodoreda wrote from memory
about pre-war Barcelona
and post-war Barcelona,
a sad, dirty and ugly city.

In 1949, Mercè Rodoreda returned to Barcelona
to visit her son and her mother,
but she didn't like the city she found.

The cheerful Catalan city of her youth was gone.
During this period,
she wrote her 3 most **urban** novels.
She once again connected with her Catalan readers
and became famous.

Urban stories
take place in a city.

At the same time, in Geneva,
Mercè Rodoreda wrote a lot.
In 6 years, she wrote some of her most famous works:
Garden by the Sea,
the start of *A Broken Mirror*,
In Diamond Square,
the stories in "Real Flowers",
My Cristina and Other Stories
and *Camellia Street*.

She also spent 3 years writing *Death in Spring*,
but never finished it.



◀ Mercè Rodoreda and Joan Sales
having coffee in the garden of the
publisher's house in Barcelona
1964
Exhibition copy, 2025
Institute of Catalan Studies –
Mercè Rodoreda Foundation,
Barcelona

Where was my home?

At the end of his journey,
Adrià from *War, So Much War* says to himself:
“I would go home, but where was my home?
Do I still have a home?”

Rodoreda's novels do not talk about exile directly.
Exiled characters
only appear in some of the stories from *Twenty-Two Tales*,
her first short story collection.

But exile can be seen in the places
where the protagonists of her stories live,
places they often share
with other people and animals.

Colometa lives in 2 different homes.
The first has a flat roof,
where her first husband Quimet raised pigeons.
Later, with her shopkeeper husband,
she lives in a flat close to the ground
where rats eat the grain.

Mercè Rodoreda plays with spaces
which have different meanings.
Sometimes the spaces are opposites,
like the house and the garden in *A Broken Mirror*.

In *Camellia Street*, this link is very clear:
the protagonist doesn't feel that she belongs anywhere,
but we find her in spaces that have clearly defined meanings:
a garden fence, many different doors,
or next to a cactus growing on the wall
where the protagonist will flee.

Problems big and small.

In Diamond Square

Colometa, the protagonist of *In Diamond Square*, finds that there are small problems and big problems.

Big problems are very important and difficult things:
the war, Quimet, who is her first husband,
flying a flag before going to war,
Quimet coming home for the last time,
returning from the war to get a mattress
and take it to the battlefield,
losing your job because of your political ideas,
not being able to feed your children,
the streets full of rubble,
the houses destroyed by the war,
the problems that come from the outside world,
the repetitive moments in the lives of many women in the 1930s,
for example, the dance at the yearly festival,
going to the market or always doing household chores.

Small problems make big problems worse.
Colometa already had small problems before the war.
Small problems arise within a household or a marriage,
not because of war.
A home is not always a safe or happy place.

A difficult Barcelona. *Camellia Street*

Camellia Street clearly shows the close connection between the city and the protagonist. The main character in this book is a girl named Cecília Ce. She has no father or mother and works as a prostitute.

Cecília represents Barcelona under Franco's regime, a city that has lost its identity and has adapted to the ruling forces.

Cecília can walk all over the city and see very different places, from the poorest shantytowns to the Liceu, a place of rich people.



- ▲ Jordi Baron Rubí
Comte d'Urgell, 83. "Domus Barcino" series (16)
2021
Giclée paper. Photo by Rag Baryta
Print, 2023
Courtesy of the artist

But she can't watch the city without being watched,
because a woman living on the streets can be criticised by everyone.
This doesn't happen to men.

Mercè Rodoreda connects with several European authors,
such as Defoe, Baudelaire, Proust, Dumas,
Verdi and Lewis Carroll, and also with the Spanish classic *El Lazarillo*.

Cecília's story shows how,
under the fascist regime,
men controlled women
and people often reported their neighbours.



▲ Jordi Baron Rubí
Passeig de Gràcia, 93. "Domus Barcino" series (6)
2006
Giclée paper. Photo by Rag Baryta muntat en Forex
Print, 2023
Courtesy of the artist

A haunted house.

A Broken Mirror

A Broken Mirror takes place
in an abandoned house with a sad garden.
This house is home to a rich family
with a woman who does not follow the rules of her class.

At the start of the book,
Mercè Rodoreda explains that she wants to write
about the disappearance of the lifestyle
of Barcelona's wealthy families.

A Broken Mirror also explores
the history of European novels
and how literature changed
between the 19th and 20th centuries.

We see this period in history
through 3 generations
of the novel's main family
and the people who work for this family.

Rodoreda uses certain elements from horror novels,
such as abandoned houses that may have ghosts.
She also uses elements from serial novels,
because the story is divided into episodes.

Rodoreda also uses a writing technique called “**interior monologue**”, to show characters’ most intimate thoughts and feelings.

In **interior monologues**, the narrator knows everything the character is thinking.

The narrator knows everything the characters are thinking and doing and tells us their secrets and dramas.

Authors such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner also use the interior monologue technique.

In *A Broken Mirror*,

Rodoreda returns to the gardens of Sant Gervasi, the gardens of her childhood, and makes them an important place in the story.

She also places Catalan literature on a par with European literature.



▲ Jordi Baron Rubí
Rambla, 102. “Domus Barcino” series (3)
2006
Giclée paper. Photo by Rag Baryta muntat en Forex
Print, 2023
Courtesy of the artist

TRANSFORMATION

Some of Mercè Rodoreda's characters
want to become natural elements:
trees, flowers, fish, wind or water.

This desire for transformation connects with exile
and the need for freedom.
The characters undergo profound changes.
Sometimes their bodies, souls or even their names change.

Mercè Rodoreda's exiles
are not just people without a country.
They are also people who live on the margins of society:
people who are alone, witches,
people who wander the world without a fixed address,
people who run away to avoid being sent to war
and people who don't know who they are.

Mercè Rodoreda uses ideas from the classical and European tradition,
and writers such as Ovid, Apuleius, Kafka, Dante and Petrarch.
But she offers her own vision of the female world
and its connection to nature and animals.
Her characters share actions
and thoughts with animals and nature.

Nature can be dangerous:
the earth breathes, the air gets angry,
the water feels self-confident,
and trees feed on dead bodies.

But nature can also help people
and protect characters who are lost.
Rivers or forests can be safe places
for these lost characters,
who truly admire nature.
Nature connects them with deep, important things.

In fact, nature connects everything,
like a tree burying its roots in the ground
while it touches the sky with its leaves.



◀ André Romão
Hand (Mercè)
2021
Camellia wood
and fragment of
sculpture (Portugal,
18th century))
Private collection,
Portugal

Being nature

In some of Rodoreda's stories,
characters are transformed
and become animals or elements of nature.
This often happens when they come into contact
with fire, water or other natural forces.

In "The Salamander",
a woman accused of being a witch
becomes an animal thanks to fire.

In "The River and the Boat",
the protagonist is reborn as a fish in the river.
Mercè Rodoreda sees this kind of transformation
as the only happy kind of transformation.

Sometimes her characters are not accepted by others
because they have become united with nature.
This has to do with an old and unfair idea:
that women and animals unite,
and that this relationship is dirty and bad.

In "The Gentleman and the Moon", the moon leaves a mark on the face
of the protagonist, who touched it.

In "My Cristina",
the saliva of a whale leaves a mark on a sailor's cheek.
The whale saved him and took care of him as if it were his mother.
This story is inspired by a passage from the Bible.

In "The Hen",
a man shares his bed with a hen
to replace his dead wife.
It is a very harsh and violent story.

The main character of *In Diamond Square*
is called Colometa, meaning "pigeon girl".
But her real name is Natàlia.
She feels she has lost her identity and become a bird.

In *Death in Spring*, a prisoner is punished
and forced to make horse sounds.
He is no longer treated as a person.

In all these stories,
becoming an animal does not mean freedom.
It means loss, pain and punishment.

Telling stories from the other side

In many of Mercè Rodoreda's novels and stories, the characters tell their life stories in the first person, but almost always from the world of the dead or the nearly dead.

There are characters that have changed so much that they are no longer the same.

In the novel *In Diamond Square*, we believe it is Colometa speaking when she is young, but Natàlia speaking when she is an old woman.

In *Death in Spring*, the story is told by a dead 14-year-old boy.

In "The Salamander", the narrator looks like a woman, but is someone who has become an animal.

The characters tell us who they were before and how they ended up where they are now.

These situations are narrated through the **monologues** of characters who have 2 voices: one for what they were before and another for what they are now, after a major change.

They tell their story from this new and different place. This narration style also reflects exile. It shows what it's like to live between 2 places or feel isolated from society.

Monologues
are stories told
in the first person.

SOUL

Death is the final transformation.
When the body stops, the soul is liberated.
In Mercè Rodoreda's works,
there are many references to this transition to another world.

There are angels, souls that are soap bubbles
that can only be seen by the innocent.
The voices and souls of dead people also appear
to return to the places where they once lived.

We don't know what Mercè Rodoreda believed in,
but we know that she was interested in mixing different traditions
and explored the world of dreams and nightmares.

At the beginning of *A Broken Mirror*,
Mercè Rodoreda writes a list called "Angels in my books".
She copies excerpts from these books
to make it easier for people to study her works.

In "It Looked Like Silk",
the protagonist is afraid of the angel who watches over cemeteries.

In *Camellia Street*,
Cecília collects life-size angels.

Colometa from *In Diamond Square*
sees dead soldiers
emerging from an altar as if they were fish eggs.
She also hears angels scolding people
for all the bloodshed.

Despite the pain and death,
Rodoreda also shows us that heaven can be anywhere.
Even in a puddle of rainwater.

Mix of traditions and beliefs

Mercè Rodoreda mixes many ideas in her works.
This shows her deep understanding of different traditions and beliefs
and her curiosity about spirituality.

For example,
she referenced the myth of Plato's winged chariot,
read texts from India
that tell of how souls are reborn in other bodies,
and was also aware that, according to Catalan tradition,
souls can take other forms:
bee, bird, breath or butterfly.

Mercè Rodoreda's grandfather
was a great admirer of the poet Jacint Verdaguer and
told Mercè stories from the Bible.
As a child, Mercè Rodoreda would go to Mass with her grandfather.

When Rodoreda was growing up in Catalonia,
the most important poet in the country
was Verdaguer, a priest who wrote **exorcisms**.

Exorcisms

are ceremonies
to drive evil spirits from
human bodies.

Between the 19th century and the Spanish Civil War,
spiritualism was very popular
among the Catalan working class.

Spiritualism

is
the belief that the
souls of the dead can
communicate
with the living.

Later, Franco outlawed spiritualism,
but Mercè Rodoreda describes these practices in her books,
and sometimes jokes about them.

Rodoreda's first novel is called *Am I an Honest Woman?*
She wrote it in 1932,
but never let it be published again.

In this book, she makes a joke about a spiritualism session.
She also includes Allan Kardec, who talked a lot about spiritualism,
as a character in the novel.



▲ Josefa Tolrà
The Fairies
Undated
Ink, gouache and coloured pencils on paper
© Josefa Tolrà Foundation Collection - Visionary Art

Dreams and nightmares

Even Rodoreda's realistic novels have elements that reason cannot explain, such as fantastic episodes and strange situations.

Rodoreda's style is clear and precise and gets the reader to see everything she wants to show. She can show very real scenes and, at the same time, images that are like dreams.

Sometimes she shows the fine line between sanity and madness, between being a person who trusts nothing or trusts too much.

This line is like a mirror:
it makes us feel strange about ourselves.

As Mercè Rodoreda herself put it:
"Behind the mirror is the dream.
We all want to reach the dream,
which is our deepest reality,
without breaking the mirror."

Many of Rodoreda's characters have dreams of nightmares.
Rodoreda read the writings of Swiss psychologist Carl Jung.

That's why she describes her characters' thoughts and feelings and also transforms stories from folktales and popular wisdom.

In this way, she makes familiar stories strange.
For example, the sun and the moon,
which are found
in many traditional tales and legends
can mean very different things
in Mercè Rodoreda's stories.



▲ Tura Sanglas
The Multiple Eye of the Night II
2020
Watercolour and silver leaf on paper
Courtesy of the artist
© Tura Sanglas Photograph: Jordi Puig

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More information

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