

# “Compassion” and Blacks in a Story by José Martí

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In 1889, when José Martí began publishing *La Edad de Oro*, his idea was to instill in children ethical and moral values. To this end, he creates various fictional characters who embody these sentiments, the most well known of whom are Pilar in “Los zapaticos de rosa” [The Pink Shoes] and Piedad in “La muñeca negra” [The Black Doll]. In both of them, Martí projects images and behavioral social models that parents should teach their little ones. In both, the girls are white and their parents are economically well off, but the children openly establish solidarity with someone who does not have their social status and is not a member of their race.

In the story “La muñeca negra,” Martí recreates a situation through words and actions that express feelings of belonging, love of one’s surroundings and things, and rejection of things unknown or foreign. Piedad always played with her black doll, so much so, that the doll looked pretty worn. On her birthday, her parents give her a beautiful gift: a porcelain doll whose function it was to replace the other. Yet, Pilar rejects the gift and prefers her own doll. Her words at the end of the story perfectly explain her choice and summarize the story’s moral: “I love you because they do not!”<sup>1</sup>

Critics have rightly pointed out Martí’s anti-racism in this story,<sup>2</sup> but it might be more accurate to say it demonstrated his “charity,” “duty” or “compassion” for blacks and, finally, his desire to accept those others did not. The story’s protagonist, Piedad, would rather keep her old, black doll not so much because she likes it, but because no one likes her. Pilar’s behavior may very possibly represent the way she was and was not anchored in desire, but rather in sacrifice or a belief that one should love those no one wants. In this sense, it is helpful to recall a testimony by María Mantilla about the kind of woman Martí tended to dance with when they accompanied each other to parties in New York when Martí was exiled there:

Whenever there was a get-together to which Cuban families were invited to celebrate someone’s birthday or some other occasion there was music and a bit of dancing, and Martí always asked the least attractive young and older women. I would later ask him: “Martí, why do you always dance with the ugliest ones?” He would answer: “My daughter, no one pays attention to the ugliest ones, and it is our responsibility to keep them from feeling ugly.”<sup>3</sup>

What this tells us is that Martí's desires and sense of obligation are different from those of others. Thus, it is not strange that in the story "the black doll" the same logic is at play. Piedad, the little, eight year-old girl, does not choose to keep her old black doll because she is beautiful or she likes it more than the other new one. Instead, she does it because it is her duty "not to let the doll feel ugly." Even if desire and passion are deeply rooted in a subject, obligation imposes a limit, sets a course that the speaker should follow. More over, the other doll does not wish to speak to Pilar and the girl suggests that it has expensive taste: "Come now, Madame doll. Let's go out for a stroll. You must want carriages and coachmen, and chestnut sweets, Madame doll."<sup>4</sup> Her doll, however, want nothing, is not a "Madame," nor does she have to treat her as if she were one. One might say that Martí projects in her the ugliness he sees in the women at the parties. Yet, like Piedad, he acts not according to his taste, but to his duty, and he chooses them.

Piedad's name is enough to let us see that her final decision was governed by her ethical nature. Her name, particularly for a nineteenth-century reader, evoked a strong sense of religiosity, which was no doubt close to the magazine editor's requirements, Mr. Acosta Gómez, when he entered into an agreement with Martí to publish it.

The Dictionary of the Royal Academy of Language of Spain (1989) reminds us that "Piedad" defines the "virtue that tender devotion to saintly things inspires for the love of God, and the acts of sacrifice and compassion due to a love for one's neighbor."<sup>5</sup> Naturally, "La Piedad" is also the name given to the representation of the Holy Virgin holding Jesus's cadaver after his crucifixion, the image made famous by Michelangelo (1475-1564) during



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the Renaissance, which is known as *La Pietà*, a sculptor that today can found in the Vatican.

The story does not reveal if Piedad's family is religious, but it is insinuated that the father has an image of the Virgin on his table. He states that this Virgen is like "Piedad, a Piedad dressed in a long dress."<sup>6</sup> One look at the Michelangelo's *La Pietà* and one will see that the Virgjn has a cape on her, and a "long dress."

The girl's image in the story is even modeled on that of a virtuous mother who tells her daughter—"the black doll"—what the correct social behavior codes are. She is the typical image of a "mother" that girls emulate when they play. Martí used it to instill in children an idea of "nation" and social cohesion.<sup>7</sup> Yet it also implies something with a religious origin, something that was commonly found in U.S. abolitionist campaigns, in anti-slave and Indigenist literature, and was part and parcel of the content of the preaching done by the "Friends of Indians" organization in

the United States, which asked whites to see them as human beings, brethren and children, to change their situation on reservations.

Martí himself wrote an infinite number of times about the need to have compassion for blacks. This argument was also commonly found in the writing of Cubans who opposed the slave trade or rejected the extremely unjust and violent treatment to which they were subjected at sugar plantations. For example, in one of his letters to Gonzalo de Quesada, Martí asks that his daughter pray that he might “bring men together in patience and compassion.”<sup>8</sup> In a chronical in *La Liga*, in New York, he talked about “compassionate patriotism, which is the only patriotism.”<sup>9</sup>

So, how are we to understand this story? If we consider it a sort of political allegory that employs a parable to explain the relationship between blacks and whites in Cuba, Martí would be emphasizing the need to accept, protect and educate blacks the way a mother would with her own children. He would be asking his readers to have “compassion” for them because they had been victims, like Jesus Christ, of disdain from others. Piedad, true to her name, does what the children who read this story should do, and the reader feels this is a proper decision. Her position is the same as those of writers Harriet Beecher Stowe and Helen Hunt Jackson when they demanded better treatment for blacks and Indians in the United States.

There was a reason why Martí said that upon writing the first of these novels Beecher Stowe had opened U.S. hearts to “compassion for blacks, and that no one help more than she to free them.”<sup>10</sup> In addition, in 1890, he complains that an orator from the Southern United States speaks “without the compassion the situation of blacks demands.”<sup>11</sup> These are the same feelings that appear a

bit later in poem XXX in his collection *Versos Sencillos* (1891). One cannot help but admire the poet/child for feeling what he did when he saw a black man “hung from a *ceiba* tree in a rural area.”<sup>12</sup> As one might expect, his attitude in seeing this was to sacrifice himself, do as Christ did, and swear to “cleanse the crime with his own life.”<sup>13</sup> I want to clarify that the image of a black or Indian as a child is a common and historical image in colonial literature. It popped up so many times in the recurring, diminutive form of “*negrito*,” so common in Cuba, and applied Indians too, for it was common to apply it to them when dealing with them, and when legislating their rights, because it was thought that they were not mature enough to know what they wanted.

In any event, the image of whites as protective fathers or mothers is controversial, at the very least, since the idea of “protection” meant that whites should decide for them (they should be paternalistic), instruct them as to what was best, which when actually done meant they were robbing them of their ability to decide, and they could keep them in the same colonial position that had brought about their present condition.

In the story about the “black doll,” Martí only develops the Piedad/mother and daughter/black allegory in the sense of how we should see and treat them. Yet, indirectly, he is also suggesting the things to which this doll should not aspire, since he, himself, disapproves of them: those things that the other “Madame doll” the parents bought for the girl would probably want: “Come now, Madame doll. Let’s go out for a stroll. You must want carriages, and coachmen, and chestnut sweets, Madame doll.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, if no one loves the black doll, it is also the case that the black doll wants nothing. Her poverty keeps

her from aspiring to the things the other doll wants, which is why Piedad prefers her.

What, then, would be Martí's position before those blacks who despite the discrimination against them enjoyed and aspired to better positions in colonial times? If we guide ourselves by the following equation ("we love blacks because they have nothing and no one loves them"), we would have to omit the middle class that gained prominence in the early nineteenth century in Cuba, which Cirilo Villaverde captured so well in his novel *Cecilia Valdés* (1882). In other words, this "compassion" would be conditioned by the social status and material aspirations of blacks. One might be able to argue, as many Marxists have, that to begin with it is the economy or lower class that provokes discrimination. What follows, then, is that once blacks have money or enjoy the same material benefits as whites, they would no longer need "Piedad." Then they would be treated as whites or anyone else with aspirations, or anyone who had what the other "Madame" dolls wanted: carriages, coachmen and chestnut sweets. So, were these the limits for Piedad?

#### Notes:

- 1-Martí, José. *Obras completas* XVIII (La Habana: Ciencias Sociales, 1975): 484.
- 2-A number of essays have been written about this story and blacks in Martí's work. I limit myself to mentioning two: Pozo Campos, Esther. "La composición en tres cuentos de *La Edad de Oro*," *Revista de la Universidad de La Habana* 235 (Mayo-Agosto 1989): 119-130, and Klein, L. B. "Ficción y magisterio en la narrativa de José Martí: 'la muñeca negra'" *Quaderni Ibero-Americani: Attualita Culturale della Penisola Iberica e America Latina* 47-48 (1975-76): 372-77.
- 3-Mantilla, María. "Recuerdos de mis primeros quince años," *Bohemia* (25 de enero de 1963): p. 11.
- 4-O. C., XVIII, 483.
- 5-*Diccionario de la lengua castellana por la Real Academia Española*. Madrid: Imprenta Don Manuel Rivadeneyra, 1869.
- 6-O. C., XVIII, 482.
- 7-Swier, Patricia L. "The Maternal Bonds of Patriotism: Modernismo and the Nationalist Discourse of Desire" in José Martí's "La muñeca negra," *Confluencia* 24. 2. (2009): 49-60.
- 8-O. C., IV, 60
- 9-O. C., II, 176.
- 10-O. C., X, 321.
- 11-O. C., XIII, 399
- 12-Martí, José. *Poesía completa* I (La Habana: Letras Cubanas, 1993): 267.
- 13-*Ibid.*
- 14-O. C., XVIII, 483.