

FACTS

The countess Emilia Pardo-Bazán (La Coruña 1851-Madrid 1921) was a Spanish professor in history of literature, as well as an author and poet. She is regarded as a tentative realist and is especially appreciated for her vivid portrayals of the life of the people. *Scissors* is one of her short stories, an art form that she considered to be the most versatile and free literary genre.

Spanish short stories have a long and rich tradition. The short tales originated in Persia and became part of the Spanish culture with the Islamic conquest of Spain – or Al-Andalus, the Arabic name of the Iberian Peninsula – in the 8th century. The great caliphate in Córdoba had excessive libraries and the books later became the first to be translated to a European language, Spanish, by the young Infant (successor of the throne) Alfonso, later Alfonso X, in the 13th century.

The Spanish novel often deals with subjects that show contrasts between the ideal and the reality, often depicting individuals with simple backgrounds showing everyday wisdom. A version of the short story is the Spanish picaresque (*picaresco*), a novel built on several episodes, where the plot is kept together by a main character – a scoundrel, loafer, or a villain. A famous example is the well-known *Don Quijote* by Miguel Cervantes, whose house still can be seen in Altea's old town.

Scissors

"Marriage," Fr. Baltar was saying as he took part without a hint of intransigence in a rather secular discussion, "marriage . . . is like a pair of scissors."

"Like scissors, Father?" exclaimed one of those present, showing his surprise. "Are you aware that it's a novel comparison?"

"More than novel, fitting," declared the priest, refusing with a gesture a second glass of Riga kummel. "Scissors, as you all know, are an instrument made up of two equal parts, or very similar parts, joined by a pin and rivet of the same metal. Even though each blade of the scissors is sharp and well-tempered, if the pin is missing . . . the scissors are useless. But joined by that rivet, they can create marvels and cut divinely the cloth of life."

"Understood," said another man in the group listening to the priest (a man who was knowledgeable, somewhat glib and distrustful). "You have only to tell us if you believe that superior scissors abound."

"Usually, items of superior quality never abound, or at least we're so hard to please that they always seem to be in short supply," responded with a smile that evangelical and at the same time (lovely combination!) cultured man. "Although the mystery of marriage consists of the pin, the quality of the two halves is also very important. Go into a shop and ask for scissors. They'll bring out two dozen for you, all seemingly equal, all the same price. Only by taking the two dozen pairs to your home and using them would you be able to make the right choice—that is, through use you discover the nature of the scissors. Seamstresses are so convinced of this that any pair of scissors that 'works' for them they wouldn't trade for an ounce of gold. I've found scissors made of gold! And why is this so remarkable? An example of natural love, purified by divine law! I'm going to relate to you an instance that I observed with my own eyes, one that moved me

deeply, even though it's no more than an ordinary drama, and its players, plain, common people.

"While at the monastery of S*** recovering from a fever that I picked up in Tangiers, a fever that I couldn't shake, I had the opportunity of meeting, amongst many other families, a married couple, shopkeepers who dealt in assorted cloths, flannels and cottons. Their place of business was in the arcade of the old square, not far from the cathedral. I wasn't their confessor—their parish priest was—but they liked to consult me as a friend. The woman's name was Doña Consuelo and the husband's was Don Andrés. Well-off and well-suited to each other, they would have been happy if they hadn't had a troublemaker of a son who harried and embarrassed them night and day. Quarrelsome, depraved, and spendthrift, neither his mother's tears, nor his father's reprimands, nor the exhortations which, at their request, I made to him several times, moved him to give up a single one of his vices. And so, in view of the fact that the young fellow seemed incorrigible, my advice was to send him to a faraway land where necessity and lack of support would force him to mend his ways.

"The idea suited the father fine, and even the mother realized that it was the only recourse. And as the outcast chose Manila, off to Manila he was sent, with very urgent letters of recommendation for the rector of one of our order's monasteries.

"Six months later I began to receive welcome news concerning the conduct of my protégé, who was being praised for his industriousness and his cleverness. He was turning over a new leaf. The old people, when they heard about it, were beside themselves with joy. The rector was the one who sent me such glad tidings since the young fellow wasn't in the habit of writing.

"Some time went by in this way until one day the rector's letter brought not good news but terrible news: Don Andrés's son had been stabbed to death in a fight while coming out of a cockpit. I was charged with informing the parents.

"The mission was a sad one, but our lives are surrounded by sadness, and judging that the father would bear up better at first than the mother, I summoned Don Andrés to my cell. Preparing him as best I could for the bitter pill, I gave him the news. He wasn't slow in understanding. On the contrary, he seemed to

have an inkling of what was coming. He construed 'death' from wounds as soon as I alluded to them. He didn't cry, but the expression on his face was like that of the criminal who finds himself at the stairs of the scaffold when the prison gates are opened (and I use this analogy because I've attended to a number of unfortunate offenders in their last moments).

"When Don Andrés was able to breathe freely, he crossed his hands and said: 'Father, I have to ask you a big favor. Between the two of us, let's keep Consuelo from learning what has happened. Just a few years ago my wife was robust, in good health, but this grief over our son has broken her. She'll be sixty soon and she's suffering from a serious illness, a type of consumption. If she learns of this misfortune, she'll go right away. If we prevent her from knowing that the boy has been killed, maybe she'll last a little longer (they called him the 'boy' even though he was past twenty-seven). I'll foot the bill of all the expenses run up over there—funeral, legal costs. And I forgive the murderers from the bottom of my heart, but I don't want Consuelo to find out.'

"Was I right or wrong in agreeing? I don't know. From the depths of my soul I wanted to indulge that miserable man. Every two or three weeks I went to the shop with fabricated letters, supposedly received from Manila, that spoke of their absent son and praised his progress at work, his reliability, and his integrity.

"Doña Consuelo, whose health was deteriorating visibly, coughed incessantly and suffered from constant fatigue, but she revived on hearing those favorable reports, praised them with puerile extremes, and demanded that Don Andrés share her joy.

"Do you see, Andrés, how much we have to be grateful for to San Antonio?" she would exclaim with eyes glazed from weeping that I attributed to an excess of happiness. 'Do you see what good fortune? Our boy has changed. He's behaving honorably. After he spends a few years there he'll return and we'll put him in charge of our business. Fr. Baltar, I'm going to give you some money to be delivered to him over there. We know what it's like to be young, and I don't want my son to be in need of anything.'

"And her husband, drowning his sorrows, his face turning blue, would reply: 'All right, woman. Bring Father those thirty duros . . . but for that you don't have to get so emotional. How silly!'

"You had to feel sorry for them. The mother was giving me *duros* for her son to enjoy, and the father was secretly requesting of me that they be invested in the salvation of his soul.

"I didn't deviate from my role in the slightest because I saw Doña Consuelo getting worse. With each passing day the blow of her son's death would have been more dangerous. Don Andrés, either fearful of an indiscretion on my part or not wanting to leave his sick wife's side, was always present when I went to spend time with them. I would find them together like birds perched on the same branch, huddled side by side to ward off the cold: she, coughing and insisting that 'it was nothing' and he, purplish, half-asphyxiated, asthmatic, but exerting himself to joke with his wife and even flirt with her, which in other circumstances might have struck me as comical and laughable, but which in those touched me deeply.

"And on we went with the farce of the letters, which produced such an effect on the poor mother that I even thought I noticed her motioning to me when her husband wasn't looking at us—motioning out of approval, supplication, gratitude. I interpreted her gestures like this: 'Even if the boy does something foolish, keep telling Andrés that he's behaving like an angel.' All this was supposition on my part, because I repeat—I never spent time alone with Doña Consuelo.

"One evening I was summoned at a very late hour. Don Andrés came to tell me that his wife was dying or was close to dying, that she had the whim of making her confession to me, and that it was essential to invent a letter announcing the 'boy's' imminent arrival. 'Let's see if this way we can keep her going for a few days,' he added, trembling so much that I couldn't refuse him this last favor.

"I had barely entered Doña Consuelo's room when she glanced at her husband and Don Andrés left, but not without making an expressive gesture by way of cautioning and imploring me. I approached the sick woman's bed—she was moving her lips rapidly, as if she were praying. I sat down at the head of it and spoke those affectionate phrases that are like ladlefuls of balm and which we say as a matter of course to the dying, but I was very taken aback when she turned her face to me—a face that shone with gratitude—while taking my hand to kiss it.

"Fr. Baltar,' she said, 'may God repay you for all the time that you've been deceiving my husband. Promise me that you won't disabuse him after I die!'"

"What are you saying? Deceiving him?' I asked, thinking that she was raving from weakness and fever."

"If it weren't for you,' she went on, ignoring my questions, 'Andrés would be dying too because he would know about our boy . . . I hope he never finds out!'"

"About the boy?' I exclaimed, remembering my pledge to Don Andrés. 'The boy's perfectly all right, he's on his way, and will be here soon to embrace you.'"

"Sure I'll embrace him . . . in the next life. Don't trouble yourself on my account. I knew about it right away, I even felt it in my bones. Do you think I didn't have somebody over there entrusted with writing to me everything that happened to my son? The letters were addressed to one of my women friends; that way Andrés couldn't discover if anything bad came his way. And since I had written to Fr. Rector asking him that my husband be told only the good and happy things, when you came with those made-up letters saying that the boy was still alive and working, I helped you deceive my poor Andrés, who's not at all well, and who shouldn't be distressed . . . It's been hard for me to pretend, Father, because in all these years of marriage I've never kept anything else from him . . ."

The priest ended his story at this point and, looking around, saw our faces lit up with a deeply felt empathy.

"So both of them knew and each concealed it from the other! What inner drama!" exclaimed the man who had spoken first.

"About those scissors, Father," said the skeptic, "you can certainly affirm that they were made of pure gold, with diamond inlay."

"I can affirm that I've seen them open in the shape of a cross," the priest responded pointedly.