

Clarice Lispector's "Água Viva": Literature, Culture, and the Power of Words

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Abstract

I am interested in Modernist Literature, specifically written by women, and Clarice Lispector is a renowned 20th century Brazilian writer. I have studied and authored my dissertation on a few of her works, but now want to focus on *Água Viva*, which is considered a third stage Brazilian Modernist book. It is about a woman painter who is fascinated with the power of words and poses several existential questions. Edmund White has placed Lispector in the same pantheon as Kafka and Joyce, and Hélène Cixous has given several lectures on the writers' oeuvre and style. I will focus on the voice of the woman narrator, who is facing her most honest and inner questionings as she goes through a stage in her life when she is the closest to understanding her own nature, her own existence as a Latin American woman. The flow of the prose-poetic work is intense, and the reader must also surrender themselves entirely to the mind of the painter/poet. This way they will be able to understand what it is to be a mature and independent Brazilian woman of 50 years ago. Further, I will explain how I use literature in the world language classroom, in the hopes of motivating students to understand other cultures, learn and appreciate the power of words, and of literature.

Keywords: Reading, Second Language Acquisition, Modernism

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Introduction

“Preciso terrivelmente de você. Nós temos que ser dois. Para que o trigo fique alto”
[I need you terribly. We must be two. So that the wheat grows tall].

Clarice Lispector (*Lispector & Ferraz, 2020*)

Clarice Lispector was a wonderful Brazilian Modernist writer who never failed to impress but was not always understood. Most of her short stories and novels present the reader with characters in search of something or in a process of growth, of internal discovery that pushes the reader into a fascinating journey. In *Água Viva*, something similar occurs, rather randomly perhaps. The narrator's flow guides the reader but also disorients. To Lúcia Helena, *Água Viva* is "Nem romance, nem novela, nem conto, nem poema, apenas (e isso não é pouco) fragmento, história em ruína, *Água Viva* condensa tensões e desestabiliza expectativas, fazendo-se linguagem ardente, corpo de significantes em cenas fulgor" (Helena, 1997, p. 98). [Neither novel, nor soap opera, nor short story, nor poem, just (and this is no small feat) fragment, story in ruin, *Água Viva* condenses tensions and destabilizes expectations, becoming fiery language, a body of signifiers in brilliant scenes]. I discuss some aspects of this story in ruin that can confuse and enlighten, but hopefully in the end raise some interesting existential questions as well as improve students' language skills.

In *Água Viva*, one of the themes that stand out is freedom. Woman's freedom, a feeling of total happiness deriving from such liberty of the mind and creativity. I will discuss a bit about that and how it is inspiring to the reader to allow themselves to experience something similar. Also, through this type of fluid reading, I think it is possible to teach Portuguese language students not only many new words and practice structures but also motivate their creativity, critical thinking, and personal growth. *Água Viva* is a unique combination of the simple and the complex, the body and the soul, the physical and the transcendental, and it is my hope that it will guide students to experience some of those as they read and reflect upon the literary piece.

A Woman's Freedom

A constant theme in *Água Viva* is freedom. It is the sort of freedom of heart and soul that does not depend on where one is but rather on one's inner self. The reader knows the writer is a woman, and that makes sense from the perspective of a mature, independent woman in the 1970s in Brazil. Clarice Lispector was then divorced, living in an apartment in Rio by choice, visiting the Botanical Garden in that city, and writing as much as she possibly could every chance she had. She was a successful journalist and had published many short stories and seven books before she published *Água Viva* in 1973, four years before her passing in 1977. She had been writing since childhood and published her first novel as a young adult. She was from a poor Jewish Ukrainian family who immigrated to the northeast of Brazil escaping Russian persecution during that country's civil war. At the age of twelve, she moved with her family to Rio de Janeiro and entered law school at twenty-one, graduating in 1944. She frequently wrote for the newspaper. She worked all her life, in and out of the house as she traveled to different parts of the world with her diplomat husband. She achieved true and complete freedom after her divorce when she was able to fully dedicate herself to her thoughts and her writing.

In *Água Viva* the reader is invited to a journey hand in hand with the narrator. It is a journey that involves intuition, self-discovery, freedom to imagine anything that is not limited to time

or space. What matters is the present, but the past and the future exist as an illusion that also inspires and motivates. Telma Maria Vieira concludes in her analysis of Lispector's reader that the author's metalinguistic process offers innumerable possibilities of study, but she chooses to center her reading in the implicit reader (Vieira, 1998, p. 19). Such a reader is constructed in the text and has a narrow connection with language, the characters, the narrator, the author, and all become characters. I argue that the reader also becomes a character in *Água Viva*. The end of the prose-poem is a revelation of the reader's pertinent place in this journey: "O que te escrevo é um 'isto'. Não vai parar: continua. Olha para mim e me ama. Não: tu olhas para ti e te amas. É o que está certo" (Lispector & Ferraz, 2020). [What I write to you is 'this'. It will not stop: it goes on. Look at me and love me. No: look at yourself and love yourself. It is what is right]. The reader is left with a sense that they are enchanted, that time goes beyond the present moment as they learn to love themselves, or at the very least love themselves more as Clarice wants them to do. The reader is equally free, independent, ecstatic, full of the complete hallelujah they learn about in the first paragraph of this beautiful work.

Literature in the Study of Language and Culture and the Creation of Art

There is a narrator-character in LW who is a painter and a writer and guides the reader throughout the text to engage in the story telling. It is thus very easy to use *Água Viva* in the language and culture classroom because the narrator-character involves the reader in the process the whole time. Telma Maria Vieira, in *Clarice Lispector: uma leitura instigante*, points out that "Clarice Lispector's fiction, especially *Água Viva*, has what Olga de Sá called 'poetics of the instant': the attempt to grasp the present moment. The desire to take possession and write the "it" of things turns difficult due to the 'discursivity of language', against which Clarice Lispector fights hand to hand" (Vieira, 1998). Thus, Clarice Lispector's writing seeks to break the limits of the signifier, therefore, needing a special reader who, like her, is willing to build themselves throughout the narrative and read in an unlimited way. The reader needs to be sensitive to participate in the conversation with the narrator-characters and even with the author herself, who is textualized. Additionally, Valdicléa Souza notes that:

Com efeito, o narrador-personagem abre seu texto convidando o leitor para um jogo. Ele – que objetiva desconstruir os sentidos das coisas–brinca com leitor em todo o texto. Como uma criança diante de um brinquedo novo, o narrador-personagem desmonta a palavra em busca de uma origem primeira e absoluta. Todavia, o texto fica desmontado, porque, em seu jogo discursivo, o que interessa é desmontar para que os leitores possam juntar as peças do quebra-cabeça. Descobrimos, então, a intenção discursiva do narrador e, conseqüentemente, a figura de leitor construída em toda narrativa. (Souza, 2018)

[In effect, the narrator-character opens their text by inviting the reader to a game. They—who objectively deconstruct the meanings of things—play with the reader throughout the text. Like a child faced with a new toy, the narrator-character dismantles the word in search of a first and absolute origin. However, the text remains disassembled, because, in its discursive game, what matters is dismantling so that readers can put the pieces of the puzzle together. We then discover the narrator's discursive intention and, consequently, the figure of the reader constructed throughout the narrative].

This is pertinent to the process of reading and learning Portuguese through literature. The Second Language Acquisition class students may also creatively participate in the game as they practice reading and learn new vocabulary and structures. Such a powerful narrator character is the perfect motivator for the students. For example, in several passages, they discuss time, the essence of time, the seed of time, the past, present, and future. Students in the intermediate and advanced levels can write more elaborate sentences after reading passages of *Água Viva* in those tenses, but beginning level students are soon capable of asking and answering questions in the present tense and near future using *Água Viva* as inspiration. “Nova era, esta minha, e ela me anuncia para já. Tenho coragem? Por enquanto estou tendo: porque venho do sofrido longe, venho do inferno de amor mas agora estou livre de ti. Venho do longe—de uma pesada ancestralidade” (Lispector & Ferraz, 2020, p. 13). [“New era, this mine, and it announces to me right away. Do I have the courage? For now, I am having it: one of because I came from suffering far away, I come from the hell of love but now I am free from you. I come from far away—from a heavy ancestry”].

In this paragraph, the narrator-character reflects upon their courage and concludes it has to do with their ancestry. This is a common concept many people like to discuss, so an idea for the classroom is to have students describe their ancestry. They will read the paragraph in class and describe their family. Beginning level students can learn vocabulary about the family and draw a family tree, whereas intermediate level students can go a step further by sharing what they know about their ancestors, or their best guess, or even how they imagine their ancestors’ lives were.

The narrator-character is a lover of words, and that is inspiring. Several pages deal with the concept of freedom. Those are two different concepts that can be explored philosophically or in more tangible ways. The way Sunday is described is so simple yet deep and revealing of a Sunday in a tropical place:

Agora é dia feito e de repente de novo domingo em erupção inopinada (súbita). Domingo é dia de ecos—quentes, secos, e em toda parte zumbidos de abelhas e vespas gritos de pássaros e o longínquo das marteladas compassadas—de onde vêm os ecos de domingo? Eu que detesto domingo por ser oco. Eu que quero a coisa mais primeira porque é fonte de geração--eu que ambicio beber água na nascente da fonte—eu que tudo isso, devo por sina e trágico destino só conhecer e experimentar os ecos de mim, porque não capto o mim propriamente dito. Estou numa expectativa estupefaciente, trêmula, maravilha, de costas para o mundo, e em alguma parte foge o inocente esquilo. Plantas, plantas. Fico dormitando no calor estio do domingo que tem moscas voando em torno do açucareiro. Alarde colorido, o do domingo, e a esplendidez madura. E tudo isso pinteí há algum tempo e em outro domingo. E eis aquela tela antes virgem, agora coberta de coisas maduras. Moscas azuis cintilam diante de minha janela aberta para o ar da rua entorpecida. O dia parece a pele esticada e lisa de uma fruta que numa pequena catástrofe os dentes rompem, o seu caldo escorre. Tenho medo do domingo maldito que me liquifica. (Lispector & Ferraz, 2020, p. 14)

[Now the day is over and suddenly again Sunday in an unexpected eruption. Sunday is a day of echoes—hot, dry, and everywhere the buzzing of bees and wasps, the cries of birds and the distant sound of rhythmic hammering—where do Sunday's echoes come from? I hate Sundays for being hollow. I who want the most important thing because it is the source of generation--I who aspire to drink water from the source of the fountain--I want all of this, I must by fate and tragic destiny only know and experience the

echoes of myself, because I do not capture myself properly said. I am in stupefying anticipation, trembling, wonder, with my back to the world, and somewhere the innocent squirrel runs away. Plants, plants. I stay asleep in the heat of the Sunday summer with flies flying around the sugar bowl. Colorful fanfare, that of Sunday, and mature splendidity. And all of this I painted some time ago and on another Sunday. And here's that previously virgin canvas, now covered with ripe things. Blue flies flicker before my window opens to the dull street air. The day looks like the stretched and smooth skin of a fruit that in a small catastrophe the teeth break and its juice run out. I'm afraid of the damn Sunday that liquefies me].

I would ask students to start by jotting down some words to explain what their least favorite day of the week is, then share with their partner and inquire further about what they dislike about that day, and even draw each other's day, inspired by the poet/painter's actions. Further, they can suggest ways through which their least favorite could become less tedious or burdensome. To analyze a bit about the culture, a subject that has become equally important in the U.S.A. World Language Education, the conversation could go to differences in lifestyle in Brazil and the U.S.A. or the student's country/ies of origin. Sundays in Brazil are for the most part days of rest, family visits, long lunches with typical foods, music or TV and conversation, and so on. How do students spend their Sunday? I can see many of them talking about finishing their homework due on Canvas by 11:59pm. What would they wish they were doing instead? Do they fear any day of the week the way the poet/painter fears Sundays? Would you paint or do something you like to make your least favorite day more interesting or fun?

The narrative ends on a Saturday, and the reader will remember that is the day before the narrator-character's most dreaded day. The cycle goes on, and that is an invitation for reflection on life, time, and purpose. As Lúcia Helena points out, "mais do que metalinguagem, em *Água viva* há um constelado, uma rede entramada e obsessiva, uma teia de linguagem que revê a temporalidade linear dos antigos textos[...]. E é neste espaço-tempo, instante-já, que se constrói a teia de linguagem de Lispector na qual, experiência de vida e escrita, o sujeito se inscreve na história" (Helena, 1997, p. 91) [More than metalanguage, in *Água Viva* there is a constellation, an interlocking and obsessive network, a web of language that reviews the linear temporality of ancient texts [...]. And it is in this space-time, instant-now, that Lispector's web of language is constructed in which, life experience and writing, the subject is inscribed in the story]. For the more artistic students, this is all plenty of food for thought. Drawing, painting, writing, and photographing are some projects of which I can think. I would suggest students pursue and present their creative work inspired by *Água Viva* as an end-of-the-semester project presentation.

Esther Schat et al, in "Key Principles for an Integrated Intercultural Literary Pedagogy: An Educational Design Research Project on Arts Integration for Intercultural Competence" show how they treat literature in the language and cultural classroom as an art form. My goals and process of teaching literature in the language and culture classroom are like theirs. By treating literature as an art form, they formulate research-based design principles for an integrated intercultural literary pedagogy (IILP) that may foster intercultural competence through arts integration in foreign language classes at the pre-university level in the Netherlands. Their results illustrated the effectiveness of IILP-based lesson materials for intercultural competence. Although participating students encountered some difficulties relating to the functionality of the design, students appreciated its social relevance. They reported that processing literary texts through dialogic tasks with peers in the target language fostered intercultural language learning (Schat et al., 2021, p. 332). The narrator-character in

Água Viva is very engaging, so the readers/students can experience their perspective rather than simply reading about it. Such an engagement, as noted by Ana Gonçalves Matos in *Literary Texts and Intercultural Learning: Exploring New Directions*, makes literary texts highly valuable artistic expressions for intercultural development (Matos, 2012). Some of the skills implicated in the construction of textual understanding can facilitate intercultural learning, opening opportunities for a pedagogical approach in which the reading of literary texts develops students' intercultural perspective and fosters reflection on cultural difference.

Animals and Dreams in *Água Viva*

My personal experience as a reader of *Água Viva* is that I am taken to a fascinating world of animals of all kinds in a dreamlike manner. The whole narrative seems like a dream to me. It is tangible yet distant, a game of words and feelings that almost intoxicate. There is a constant search for the essence of things, the "it", and I wonder how I would describe my "it", my essence, my desire to do the simplest and the craziest or most spiritual things. The beginning of the literary piece sounds like a birth, and the end takes the reader to infinite through a cycle that never ends even though it is grounded in the present. It is truly empowering.

By using this prose-poem or story in ruin in the Portuguese as a Second Language Classroom I would like to explore the concept of dreams and take that to each students' understanding and experiences dreaming or creating a dream. They can write or describe a dream they have had or perhaps would like to have. The narrator-character dreams they are dreaming. That is, to me, the purest form of dream. A dream within a dream creates infinite opportunities for artistic creativity, production of a poem or a descriptive paragraph, or simply topic for discussion among students and instructor.

The narrator-character uses several animals to engage the reader. I believe that is a great way of engaging the students as well. Such animals are not separate and random beings, but rather they are representations of one's essence. This is sublime, in my opinion. For instance, the poet feels in one passage that they are a tiger with a mortal arrow in its flesh (Lispector & Ferraz 2020, p. 71). People around the wounded tiger fear relieving the tiger from its pain except for a fearless person that takes the arrow out of the tiger's flesh. The narrator-character is brave, and the person who aids the wounded tiger is also brave. What does that mean to the reader/student? Have they felt as if they were animals of some kind before? What type of connection have they felt? Did that bring them comfort? Lispector's art can have the reader exploit their emotions and thoughts about many philosophical and deep concepts.

In a different section of the story in ruins the character-narrator thinks of turtles. Intuition tells them a turtle is a dinosauric animal. It turns out they are correct. Since many students are in sciences, a discussion on biology is appropriate here. Alternatively, some research on other animals that have the same kind of origin, or an activity in which students explain biological concepts they already know in their first language in the target language would be challenging and rewarding to them.

Conclusion

In sum, I have articulated some of the themes in *Água Viva*. Such vary from freedom to one's essence, life and death, spirituality, dreams, and interpersonal connections. Also, I have discussed several ways in which Clarice Lispector's prose-poem or story in ruin is source of

endless possibilities for the creation of activities for the student of Portuguese as a second language as well as culture. I believe students will dive into a fascinating world of ideas that will foster their own creativity and sensibility. There are so many philosophical concepts that are empowering to the students and help them develop their Portuguese language skills and confidence in reading, writing, and speaking.

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