

ABSTRACT

Taking the notions of implicit reader and real reader as a starting point, the aim of this essay is to analyze and compare, from a Freudian-theory standpoint, “*A Benfazeja*”, a short story by Guimarães Rosa, with Sophocles’ tragedy *Oedipus Rex*.

KEY WORDS: Brazilian Literature, Guimarães Rosa, Freud.

NARRATIVITY AND SUBJECT: BETWEEN THE UNSEEING AND THE ALL ATTENTIVE

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RESUMO

Tendo como ponto de partida as noções de leitor implícito e leitor real, este artigo se propõe a analisar e a comparar – do ponto de vista da teoria freudiana – “*A Benfazeja*”, um conto de Guimarães Rosa, com a tragédia *Oedipus Rex*, de Sófocles.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura Brasileira, Guimarães Rosa, Freud.

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“To read through Freud’s glasses is to approach literature as a human activity and, as the result of this activity, to ponder what is not revealed or what is overlooked; to read what it shuts out through what it shows, and to find more in it, through this discourse, than one would through any other.”¹
(BELLEMIN-NOE, 1978, p. 12)

In “A Benfazeja”² (a short story from *Primeiras Estórias* by Guimarães Rosa) the third-person narrator begins by claiming “I know they did not observe the woman, even though this is hardly possible.”³ The statement implies that the narrator is not telling all he knows, and the plural form of the verb “atentar” (notice) makes the reader complicit with the characters that (according to the narrator) failed to closely observe her. Initially, one believes he is referring to the woman in the title, i.e., the do-gooder.

The artifice of including the reader is further expanded with the use of “vocês” (you – plural) – “You all never suspected she could assert herself so strongly, and to such excess?”⁴ – and, throughout the narrative, the reader is enticed into a web of structures which, as Iser observes, “demand an answer, that make the reader capture the text.”⁵ About the implicit and real reader, Compagnon (1999, p. 151) says:

This implicit reader proposes a pattern to the real reader; defines a point of view which allows the reader to compose the meaning of the text. Conducted by the implicit reader, the real reader’s role is, at the same time, active and passive. Thus, the reader is acknowledged simultaneously as both textual structure (implicit reader) and structured act (real reading).⁶

Within the textual structure, the relationship between the narrator and the local inhabitants is established through inquiries that are consequently addressed also to the reader: “Did they still think it wasn’t worth it? [...] So

1 “Ler com os óculos de Freud é ler uma obra literária como atividade de um ser humano e como resultado desta atividade aquilo que ela diz sem o revelar, porque o ignora; ler o que ela cala através do que mostra e porque o mostra por este discurso mais do que por outro”. (N. do T.)

2 “The Do-gooder”

3 “Sei que não atentaram na mulher; nem fosse possível.”

4 “Vocês todos nunca suspeitaram que ela pudesse arcar-se no mais fechado extremo, nos domínios do demasiado?”

5 “[...] que pedem uma resposta, que obrigam o leitor a captar o texto”. (Apud Iser, *Der akt des Lesens*, p. IX.)

6 “O leitor implícito propõe um modelo ao leitor real; define um ponto de vista que permite ao leitor real compor o sentido do texto. Guiado pelo leitor implícito, o papel do leitor real é ao mesmo tempo ativo e passivo. Assim, o leitor é percebido simultaneamente como estrutura textual (o leitor implícito) e como ato estruturado (a leitura real)” (COMPAGNON, 1999, p. 151).

it never even occurred to them, then, that they might be entirely and totally wrong?" (ROSA, 1985, p. 113).⁷

In Guimarães' short story, the real reader is not only led on by the implicit reader, he is also passively complicit in that he is also a subject of analysis, just as if he were one of the villagers. From a distance, the narrator is all seeing and, in his omniscience, knows what the characters think and desire. After all, they are all people of the village. While others are inattentive, the narrator maintains his role an observer, and reflects upon the attitudes and desires of the villagers. According to the description, the village is small, which would engender a certain familiarity, but "we overlook those that merit no attention".⁸

Though the reader is treated as one of the villagers, the heterodiegetic narrator places himself at a distance, "I am an outsider"⁹ (p. 115). He is thus well positioned to argue and, more to the point, to instigate disclosure of meanings, making everyone he focuses upon not only aware of their acts but also of their desires, thereby opening the field for the necessary distance and reflection: "And, never forget, engrave in your memories, tell your children born and as yet unborn, what you saw with your own horror-struck eyes, and could neither avoid, nor comprehend, nor propitiate"¹⁰ (p. 121-122).

The narrator pleads that the terrible fate of Mula-Marmela be passed on as a warning to others. This unfortunate creature weds Mumbungo, a man regarded as Demo (the devil) incarnate who, though he commits the most terrible atrocities, lives in fear of his wife. The villagers wish for the death of this miscreant, but know that only Mula-Marmela can bring it about. They get their wish; eventually Mula-Marmela commits the crime they all wish for: she murders Mumbungo. But there is still the blind boy Retrupé, son of the Dog (Satan) and stepson of Mula-Marmela, that follows in his father's footsteps. However, not long after, the village is freed from his evil presence: Mula-Marmela strangles Retrupé and leaves the village. Before leaving, however, she picks up a dead dog, "to release the place from its perilous pestilence; providing it, out of pity, with an earthly grave; or to have someone or something to cling to, when it is time for her to meet her lonely death"¹¹ (p. 122).

7 Henceforth, when referring to the text, only the page number is given. "Acham ainda que não valia a pena? [...] E nem desconfiaram, hem, de que poderiam estar em tudo e por tudo enganados?"

8 "[...] a gente não revê os que não valem a pena".

9 "Sou de fora."

10 "[...] e, nunca se esqueçam, tomem na lembrança, narrem aos seus filhos, havidos ou vindouros, o que vocês viram com seus olhos terrorosos, e não souberam impedir, nem compreender, nem agradecer".

11 "[...] para livrar o logradouro de sus pestilência perigosa, para piedade de dar-lhe cova em terra, ou para com ele ter com quem ou com quê se abraçar, na hora de sua grande morte solitária".

In attempting to establish connections, the narrator observes, reports, and questions. His enquiries are comprehensive, but not textually answered. After all, objective answers are hardly the point, since the real intention is to instigate reflection on the part of those who live cheek-by-jowl in this small place.

However, this initial familiarity is never fully consummated, since the village is not given a distinctive name or geographical location. Indeed, it could be anywhere where “people live too close to one another, in a twilight zone, habitually drawn into each other’s sloth”¹² (p. 113). Moreover, from the smallness of the place we can conclude that people live stiflingly close to one another in the monotony of their day-to-day lives. Drab familiarity is the atmosphere that permeates the narrative, and is all that can be expected in so small and commonplace a village. However, such familiarity jars paradoxically with gaping unknowns; for example, the villagers know nothing of the woman they fear so much, “if they at least knew her name... but no... though I ask, no one can tell me”¹³ (p. 113).

To see the village in its day-to-day drabness is to never want to see it again. Indeed, when the focus is enlarged, the entire village falls from “weak shadows” into utter darkness, revealing the indifference of the characters that live there, and that do not even know the name of that “hussy, evildoer, unclean, pitifully old and ugly, foolish, and unrepentant” (p. 113)¹⁴ woman. As a guide to her blind stepson, Mula-Marmela is described in minute detail; at the same time she is mysterious and unknown, owing to disinterest on the part of the villagers. Faced with what they consider despicable, not one of them has “any interest at all in her, and they take no notice of how she walks, feels, lives, or what she does”¹⁵ (p. 117).

The blind beggar boy, known only as Retrupé, is led around the village by Mula-Marmela after she has murdered Mumbungo. Though both she and Retrupé are often seen in the streets, they are referred to only by their contemptible nicknames. By never addressing them by Christian names the villagers “deny them Christian treatment, thereby imbuing them with the poverty of outcasts, and with strange powers”¹⁶ (p. 114).

Having assembled this triangle, comprised of a woman, a blind young man, and a murdered man, João Guimarães Rosa invokes the triad of elements

12 “[...] vive-se perto demais, às sombras frouxas, a gente se afaz ao devagar das pessoas.”

13 “Soubessem-lhe ao menos o nome. Não, pergunto, e ninguém o inteira.”

14 “[...] malandraja, a malacafar, suja de si, misericordiada tão em velha e feia, feita tonta, no crime não arrependida.”

15 “[...] não se interessam nulo por ela, não reparam como essa mulher anda, e sente, e vive, e faz.”

16 “[...] negando-lhe o de cristão, comunicavam, à rebelde indigência de um e outra, estranha eficácia de ser.”

that make up Sophocles' tragedy. He presents the main character as chained by immutable fate – “the woman had to kill, she had to do it by her own hand, for the good of all”¹⁷ (p. 115) committing murders, causing terror. Nonetheless, despite all she has done, she is worthy of pity, since she thereby brought relief to those who wished for and witnessed the tragic acts she committed. Therefore, the two conflictive relationships become linked, and the main character, Mula-Marmela, is inextricably involved with both Mumbungo and Retrupé.

Subtle links can be found between Guimarães Rosa's “A Benfazeja” and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. The fact that Retrupé goes blind is an obvious link to the image of Oedipus, the tragic hero who (unlike the former) laments “[...] it was Apollo that wished me exposed to this bitter fate! However, the hand that smote my eyes was my own: what would I wish to see if the view brings me such displeasure”¹⁸ (SOPHOCLES, 1976, p. 82). However, with respect to Retrupé's blindness, we have no explicit statement as to its cause: we have only hints and suppositions. On becoming blind, Retrupé could well borrow Oedipus' words, questioning why he should want to see if there is no longer anything to please his eyes.

On the other hand, in the name “Retrupé”, compounded by *retro* meaning backward and the noun *pé* (foot) we perceive a similarity with the name of the tragic hero, Oedipus (whose name means swollen feet). Other significant common features between the short story and the Greek tragedy are “the organized set of loving and hostile desires that a child has in relation to parents”¹⁹ (LAPLANCHE, 1967, p. 77) i.e., what Freud called the Oedipus complex.

Other common elements in the story include: a father (Mumbungo) who is murdered; a son (Retrupé); and a woman that “since her husband's death has cared for him as a son”²⁰ (p. 118). Between Mula-Marmela and Retrupé there is a relationship that elicits snide comments and suspicions of mutual desire: “between them there must be some form of concubinage”²¹ (p. 119). However, the narrative itself informs us that “she patiently leads him to women and waits outside, making sure that they do not mistreat him”²² (p. 120). It is explicitly stated that Retrupé's sexual pleasure derives not from physical contact with his stepmother; but that it occurs through her, since

17 “[...] a mulher tinha de matar, tinha de cumprir por suas mãos o necessário bem de todos.”

18 “[...] foi o deus Apolo que me quis submeter a esta amargura! Porém a mão que golpeou meus olhos não foi a de ninguém, senão a minha: que mais pudera eu desejar ver, se a vista me dava desprazer?”

19 “[...] ao conjunto organizado de desejos amorosos e hostis que a criança experimenta relativamente aos pais.”

20 “[...] desde que morreu o homem-marido, passou a cuidar dele como um filho”.

21 “[...] entre eles teria havido alguma concubinação.”

22 “[...] ela o conduz, paciente, às mulheres, e espera-o cá fora, zela para que não o maltratem.”

she patiently leads him to women, thereby providing him with sexual pleasure while, at certain moments, treating him as a son. Eyeless Retrupé is led by Mula-Marmela, who thus exercises some authority over him and, according to the narrator, between them there are “drowned desires”²³, for “is what he senses before him a woman’s living essence; her shadow-of-the-soul, as he senses her scent?”²⁴ (p. 117).

Beyond this possibly Oedipal relationship, involving the desires and attitudes of Retrupé and Mula-Marmela, there are the desires of the villagers, revealing something strange also in them, and in what they feel.

Freud, who devoted himself to the study of strangeness, postulates that this topic is related to the scary, and to what causes fear and horror. Making use of the term *unheimlich*, the opposite of *heimlich* (familiar), Freud concludes that “what is strange is scary precisely because it is unknown and unfamiliar”²⁵, but he contradicts his own conclusion by pointing out that “not everything that is new and unfamiliar is scary”²⁶, and that “something has to be added to what is new and unfamiliar to make it strange”²⁷ (FREUD, 1976, p. 12). Freud presents aspects that can transform what is strange into what is scary (animism, magic and witchcraft, omnipotence of thought, man’s attitudes toward death, involuntary repetition and the castration complex). In the analysis of this short story, what most arouses our interest are the atrocities committed by Mula-Marmela in order to fulfill the villagers’ desires, and the fact that, as Freud put it, “we can make a living person strange by attributing to him evil intentions”²⁸ (p. 14).

It is precisely because they were motivated by omnipotence of thought and evil intentions, accomplished through special powers that, in “A Benfazeja”, the deaths of the husband and of the stepson of the main character are so markedly cruel and evil.

The first death is not described in detail, but occurs wrapped up in the hallucinatory delirium of the executioner. She “killed her husband and then, fearing herself too much, was overcome with dread. She fell, seized with terror; howling like a dog. She didn’t laugh”²⁹ (p. 117). The narrator adds, to emphasize her hallucinatory state that, from the standpoint of the

23 “[...] afogados desejos”.

24 “[...] o que ele percebe à sua frente é a essência vivaz da mulher, sua sombra-da-alma, fareja-lhe o odor, o lobem”.

25 “[...] aquilo que é estranho é assustador precisamente porque não é conhecido e familiar”.

26 “[...] nem tudo que é novo e não familiar é assustador”.

27 “[...] algo tem que ser acrescentado ao que é novo e não familiar para torná-lo estranho”.

28 “[...] também podemos falar de numa pessoa viva como estranha, e o fazemos quando lhe atribuímos intenções maldosas”.

29 “[...] matou o marido, e, depois, própria temeu, forte demais, o pavor que se refluiu, caída, dado ataque, quase fia de assombro de estupefaziameto, com o cachorro a uivar. E ela, então não riu.”

villagers “those that did not hear her laugh cannot bear the memory of her delirium”³⁰ (ROSA, 1985, p. 116).

This fated act of cruelty could only be carried out by Mula-Marmela; she alone “had to execute it by her own hand, for the good of everyone”³¹ (p. 116). Therefore, wickedness was not in her, but beyond her. The cruel sentiment emanated from everyone, and she, who acted as an emissary, “was at the service of justice (...) she felt it more than anyone else and, perhaps, without awareness”³² (p. 116). The character is possessed of secret powers, homicidal attitudes, sinister and scary behavior – features that the text stresses – which link her to a teratological world. The narrator draws attention to Mula Marmela’s extended skeleton, her bloodlessness as if drained by leeches, her evanescent eyes, her wolfish hair and sharp gait like that of a lonely mare, and her savage composure. He even describes her as a wolf, with her constant attendant stepson, a hideous dog of the underworld.

Between Mula-Marmela and Retrupé, wolf and dog, there is a “discommunion” and a relationship of hatred and subservience. Mula-Marmela’s secret powers are even more sinister when her dominant attitudes toward her constantly submissive stepson are examined. Despite being so similar, they detest each other, there is a “discommunion agreement” whereby she handles him like a puppet, leading him metaphorically by the strings of “her leading presence”, “her ways”, “her scent”.³³ Guided by these strings, Retrupé is dependant upon the woman who (the narrator suggests) was responsible for his blindness, and who turned him into “that most innocuous of beings, a resigned man”³⁴ (p. 114). The fact that Retrupé is motivated by Mula-Marmela’s omnipotent presence gives rise, once more, to a sensation of strangeness. His behavior is in reaction to her demands, for “he fears her; the woman that leads him”³⁵, obeying her calls (a mere grunt between clenched teeth, almost a hiss “a hey” or a “hu”³⁶ (p. 114). Moreover, sometimes, in her absence, he is crude, despotic, cynical, and exercises “command over souls; a type of power”³⁷ (p. 115). Retrupé is thus worthy of respect and fear in that, with his doglike voice, he is considered an evil being by the villagers.

This behavioral duality then gives rise to the second murder, also committed by Mula-Marmela. The fear of her blind stepson had, indeed, been justified. The complicity between the two was doomed to lead to this

30 “[...] os que não a ouviram rir, nem suportam se lembrar direito do delírio daquela risada.”

31 “[...] tinha de cumprir por suas mãos o necessário bem de todos.”

32 “[...] colocava-se à mercê da justiça (...) sentia mais que todos, talvez e, sem o saber, sentia por todos.”

33 “[...] sua dianteira presença”, “pelo jeito”, “pelo odor”.

34 “[...] um ser quase inócuo, um renunciado”.

35 “[...] temia-a, a ela, a mulher que o guiava”.

36 “[...] simples sílaba, entre os dentes, quase esguichado um “ei” ou “hã”.

37 “[...] “de obscuro, um mando de alma, qualidade de poder.”

tragic end, pronounced by the narrator: “it is our belief that we will soon be rid of the unloved, of what sickens and disgusts us”³⁸. However, to underscore the power of the woman over her stepson, we have Retrupé’s delirium – exactly replicating Oedipus’ premonitory dreams – in which he plans to kill her:

He was already prone to evil before he became sick, with high fever. He sat at the roadside and gasped for breath. Suddenly, he got up, without support, shouted, screamed: as mad as a dog rudely awakened. He pulled out his machete, blindly slashing out at her, in his boundless fury.³⁹ She, for her part, remained standing placidly. Was she not afraid? She just stared vacantly. (p. 120)

Guimarães Rosa chooses to ignore any confrontation, and to dwell upon the woman’s superiority, thereby further highlighting eyeless Retrupé’s inferiority. According to the villagers, Mula-Marmela carries through the final act, strangling the “poor devil”, leaving her finger and nail marks all over his body.

The narrator, in seeking to identify reasons behind such atrocities, insinuates that the unconscious desires of the inhabitants of the village are to blame. Thus, consummation of these crimes marks the fulfillment of the desires of the entire community. As Freud might put it, we have the ‘strange’ attached to the omnipotence of thought; to the immediate gratification of desires; to evil secret powers that, in this short story, culminate in the murders of those who the villagers consider the Devil incarnate.

This *unheimlich* sentiment, related to the omnipotence of thought, is revealed in the community’s hidden desire, for “it is true that it is possible to kill through merely desiring a person’s death”⁴⁰ (FREUD, 1976, p. 19). The narrator himself warns us:

The man she killed was hideous; a dog of a man; a horrible aberration; a danger and threat to the inhabitants of this place. From what I’ve heard from yourselves, I perceive that everyone (though none of you would acknowledge it or express any gratitude) stands in her debt.⁴¹ (p. 114)

38 “[...] é de crer que, breve, estaremos livres do que não amamos, do que danadamente nos enoja, pasma.”

39 “[...] Tido que já se estava maltreito, quando adoeceu mal, de febre acesa. Sentara-se à beira da rua, para arquejar. De repente, levantou-se, sem bordão, estorvinhado, gritou, bramou: exaltado como um cão que é acordado de repente. Sacou o facão, tacava-o, avançava às doidas, às mesmo cegas, tentando golpeá-la, em seu desatinado furor” [mas ela] erguida como estava, permaneceu, não se moveu, não se intimidava? Olhava na direção do não.”

40 “[...] é verdade que se pode matar uma pessoa com o mero desejo da sua morte.”

41 “[...] assassinado por ela era um hediondo, o cão de homem, calamidade horribilíssima, perigo e castigo para os habitantes deste lugar. O que ouvi, a vocês mesmo, entendo que, todos lhe estariam em grande dívida, se bem que de tanto não tomando tento, nem essa gratidão externassem.”

The situation remains unchanged after Retrupé's death, and the narrator ironically inquires of the villagers: "Do you, after all, still hate her?"⁴² (p. 121), in a direct insinuation that, once again, rather than hating Mula-Marmela, they should show gratitude. The final event brings the story to a close when, to everyone's satisfaction, Mula-Marmela herself abandons the village. The villagers, though aware of the crimes she has committed, allowed her to escape "because there could be no greater relief than seeing her leave for ever (...)"⁴³ (p. 121).

João Guimarães Rosa, with due allowance for peculiarities of place and time, uses elements of Greek tragedy to examine good and evil and, through his fiction, demonstrates that the apparently inflexible boundary separating the two may be tenuous. Such boundaries become even less certain when, based on Freudian theory, we perceive that everything is dependent upon inconstancies of human nature, and ruled by desires, i.e., that anything can be for good or for evil. Thus, even if we are influenced by the title of this short story, we are left with the question: in the light of her atrocities, can the protagonist of "A Benfazeja" really be considered a do-gooder?

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42 "[...] Vocês, distantemente, ainda a odiavam?"

43 "[...] porque maior era o alívio de a ver partir, para nunca."