

## *The modern narrator in “The hour of the Star” /* **O narrador moderno em “A Hora da Estrela”**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates the modern elements that constitute the narrator of “The Hour of the Star”, the last novel published during Clarice Lispector’s lifetime. Defined by its narrator, Rodrigo S. M., as a “mute photograph,” the book intensely explores the creative process of its fictional author, becoming the analytical focus of this study. The aim is to understand how modern narratives construct a narrator whose voice reveals the impossibility of objective neutrality or absolute omniscience - hallmarks of modern literary production. This analysis contributes to unraveling fundamental questions about modernity and its literature, characterized by the suspension of belief in science, the dissolution of institutions, and the collapse of metanarratives. These dynamics reflect the essence of the modern soul: fragmented, bereft, and self-aware. Examining Rodrigo S. M.’s literary craft allows one to uncover the intricacies of written expression, capturing its “delicate essential.” To map the elements that constitute Rodrigo S. M. as a modern narrator, this article draws on authors such as Theodor W. Adorno, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Anatol Rosenfeld.

**KEYWORDS:** A Hora da Estrela; The Hour of the Star; Modern Narrator; Rodrigo S. M.; Clarice Lispector.

### **RESUMO**

*Este artigo investiga os elementos modernos que constituem o narrador de A Hora da Estrela, último romance publicado em vida por Clarice Lispector. Definido por seu narrador, Rodrigo S. M., como uma “fotografia muda”, o livro explora intensamente o processo criativo de seu autor fictício, tornando-se o foco analítico deste estudo. Busca-se, desse modo, compreender como a narrativa moderna constrói um narrador cuja voz revela a impossibilidade de uma neutralidade objetiva ou de uma onisciência absoluta, marcas do fazer literário moderno.*

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*Esta análise contribui para desvendar questões fundamentais sobre a modernidade e sua literatura, caracterizadas pela suspensão da crença na ciência, a dissolução de instituições e o colapso das metanarrativas. Tais dinâmicas refletem a essência de uma alma moderna: fragmentada, desamparada e autoconsciente. Examinar o fazer literário de Rodrigo S. M. permite descortinar os meandros da expressão escrita, capturando seu “essencial delicado”. A fim de mapear os elementos que constituem o narrador Rodrigo S. M. como um narrador moderno, este artigo embasar-se-á em autores como Theodor W. Adorno, Mikhail Bakhtin e Anatol Rosenfeld.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** *A Hora da Estrela; Narrador moderno; Rodrigo S. M.; Clarice Lispector.*

## 1 Introduction

This article aims to identify and analyze the modern elements that constitute the narrator of *The Hour of the Star*, the last book published during Clarice Lispector's lifetime (1920–1977). Originally published in 1977, her novel has undergone numerous print editions over the years. However, this study is based on the 2017 edition, published on the novel's 40th anniversary<sup>2</sup>. This edition is notable for including photographs of select manuscript pages as well as previously unpublished essays on the work.

Clarice Lispector was a translator, novelist, journalist, short story writer, and essayist of Jewish origin who became a naturalized Brazilian citizen. She earned a law degree from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro and is widely regarded as one of the most important writers of the twentieth century. Her innovative novels and highly poetic language questioned and disrupted traditional narrative models.

At only 63 pages in the Portuguese (Lispector, 2017) edition and 76 pages in the English edition (Lispector, 2011), *The Hour of the Star* is, as Rodrigo S. M. defines it, a “mute photograph” (Lispector, 2011, p. 8). “Written” by a male narrator, the novel revolves around two thematic axes: the insipid life of Macabéa—a Northeastern migrant, orphaned typist—and the creative process of the writer/narrator, Rodrigo S. M. Greater focus will be given to this second narrative component. This study therefore aims to examine the paths Clarice took in crafting her narrator and how these choices function as a mirror of the novel's very structure.

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<sup>2</sup> This study is based on the Brazilian edition of *A Hora da Estrela*, originally written in Portuguese: Lispector, Clarice. *A Hora da Estrela: edição com manuscritos e ensaios inéditos*. Rio de Janeiro: Rocco, 2017. The English edition used is Lispector, Clarice. *The Hour of the Star*. Translated by Benjamin Moser; introduction by Cohn Toibin. New York: New Directions Books, 2011. All direct quotations in this English version of the study will be taken from the English edition of *The Hour of the Star*.

The investigation of these elements encapsulates the hypothesis of this study: that modern literary creation requires a non-traditional narrator—a narrator distant from the supreme, omniscient figure so characteristic of the nineteenth-century novel. The narrative figure of the twentieth century is what has come to be known as the unreliable narrator, whose flaws illustrate the impossibility of clear objectivity, a disinterested stance, or a neutral consciousness.

By analyzing the narrator of *The Hour of the Star*, Rodrigo S. M.—the character created by one of the most lexically prolific writers of the Portuguese language (Candido, 1970)—this study contributes to unveiling the issues that permeate modern subjectivity and its literary expressions. The product of the suspension of belief in science, the dissolution of institutions, and the end of metanarratives is presented in literature as the authentic content of the modern soul—lost, fragmented, self-aware. Studying it through a literary lens is to unveil the pathways of human expression in its “delicate essential” (Lispector, 2011, p. 4), since “every new style arises as a socio-historical necessity of life and is a necessary product of social evolution” (Lukács, 1968, p. 57, our translation<sup>3</sup>). Thus, the notion of narrative styles emerges as a socio-historical product, placing Lispector’s work in a broader context where literary creation responds to the tensions of an era marked by the dissolution of certainties and the search for new forms of expression.

## 2 The modern narrator

In order to map the elements that constitute Rodrigo S. M. as a modern narrator, this article will draw on authors whose arguments highlight the defining features of the modern narrative voice. These include Theodor W. Adorno (2003), Mikhail Bakhtin (1998) e Anatol Rosenfeld (1976). According to Bakhtin (1988), the novel—and consequently the narrator—is a form that resists precise definition. This difficulty lies in the fact that the novel is the only literary form younger than writing itself. One of the essential characteristics of the novel genre is its contact with the living, the unfinished, the present in progress. For this reason, Bakhtin compares the novel to clay: a material subject to transformation, a living, unstable, and transitory substance. The novel is, therefore, a genre in evolution—unstable, adaptable, and innovative—hence difficult to define.

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<sup>3</sup> “todo o novo estilo surge como uma necessidade histórico-social da vida e é um produto necessário da evolução social” (Lukács, 1968, p. 57)

In comparison to the epic, the novel represents a radical transformation of temporal coordinates, as at its core lies the “direct action of the transformations of reality itself” (Bakhtin, 1988, p. 400, our translation<sup>4</sup>). The revolution of time entails a revolution of structure. Meaning and significance are renewed, placing the novel at the center of the perceptual dynamics. As a result, there is a radical restructuring of the literary construction of the human subject. The immutable, unreachable past is no longer sufficient to account for human completeness. This temporal transmutation reverberates in the structure of the narrator, elevating it to an unprecedented level of complexity.

The modern narrator is transformed into an unexpected extension of the world, whose role is to challenge the supposed clarity of objectivity. The omniscience so typical of the nineteenth-century narrator is no longer viable, as modernity is characterized by the abandonment of absolute truths. Thus, the narrator’s subjective gaze “no longer tolerates any material without transforming it, thereby undermining the epic precept of objectivity” (Adorno, 2003, p. 55, our translation<sup>5</sup>).

However, according to Adorno, the position of the narrator “is today characterized by a paradox: one can no longer narrate, even though the form of the novel demands narration” (Adorno, 2003, p. 55, our translation<sup>6</sup>). Thus, what remains is for the novel to be narrated through a revolution in the subjective gaze that guides it—a gaze that is fragmented, disjointed, conscious of its own individual projections, and devoid of any claims to absolute truths or predetermined paths.

If the novel is to remain faithful to its realist heritage and truly say how things are, it must renounce a form of realism that, insofar as it reproduces the fixed, merely contributes to the production of illusion. (Adorno, 2003, p. 57, our translation<sup>7</sup>)

The narrator thus comes to embody the true object of modern literature: the conflict between living human beings and reified social relations. In this process, alienation itself becomes an aesthetic medium for the novel (Adorno, 2003). The driving force of the narrative becomes the decoding of

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<sup>4</sup> “ação direta das transformações da própria realidade” (Bakhtin, 1988, p. 400)

<sup>5</sup> “[...] não tolera mais nenhuma matéria sem transformá-la, solapando assim o preceito épico da objetividade” (Adorno, 2003, p. 55).

<sup>6</sup> “se caracteriza, hoje, por um paradoxo: não se pode mais narrar, embora a forma do romance exija a narração” (Adorno, 2003, p. 55)

<sup>7</sup> “Se o romance quiser permanecer fiel à sua herança realista e dizer como realmente as coisas são, então ele precisa renunciar a um realismo que, na medida em que reproduz afixada, apenas a auxilia na produção do engodo.” (Adorno, 2003, p. 57)

the enigma of life, personified in the Other and the Self<sup>8</sup> that surround the narrator. This effort emerges as something both frightening and uncannily unfamiliar within the context of the everyday, rendered strange by social conventions. Modern literature, by adopting distance as the foundation of narrative, does nothing more than acknowledge what has long been assumed in science and philosophy. By questioning the absolute position of a central consciousness, it critiques the role occupied by the knowing subject.

What is fundamentally new is that modern art not only recognizes this thematically but also assimilates this relativity into the very structure of the work of art itself. The vision of a reality deeper and more genuine than that of common sense is incorporated into the total form of the work. Only in this way does this vision become truly valid in aesthetic terms. (Rosenfeld, 1991, p. 81, our translation<sup>9</sup>)

The abolition of distance is a mandate of modern form itself, unlike the traditional novel, in which the narrator's position was fixed and superior. In the modern era—a time of shifting and thus inconsistent values—reality ceased to be a world that could be fully explained, and aesthetic adaptations capable of incorporating states of flux and insecurity became necessary. The narrator confesses to being unable or unauthorized to maintain the distant and superior position of the realist narrator, who projects a world of illusion from their privileged standpoint.

Thus, the modern narrator no longer aims to give the impression of impartiality—there is always a point of view with which we must engage, whose ramifications multiply and remain hidden (Dalcastagnè, 2000). This device exposes the narrator's flaws as a character and highlights their absurdities. Consequently, modern literature no longer seeks to lull our senses. It demands a committed reader, since one can no longer engage with the world without suspicion. The pretense of impartiality is over. The confused, obstinate, and openly deceptive narrator invites us to take a stand and reveals the mechanisms of our identity.

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<sup>8</sup> In Adorno's philosophy (2003), the "Other" represents that which exists outside the self, encompassing external reality, society, and alterity, often experienced as alien or estranged. The "Self", by contrast, denotes the subjective consciousness, the individual's internal identity and awareness. The tension and interaction between the Other and the Self reflect the dialectical struggle within modernity, where subjectivity is fractured and mediated by social relations and alienation. This dynamic is crucial to understanding the modern narrator's fragmented and self-conscious perspective.

<sup>9</sup> "O fundamentalmente novo é que a arte moderna não o reconhece apenas tematicamente, mas através da assimilação dessa relatividade à própria estrutura da obra-de-arte. A visão de uma realidade mais profunda, mais real, do que a do senso comum é incorporada à forma total da obra. É só assim que essa visão se torna realmente válida em termos estéticos." (Rosenfeld, 1991, p. 81)

To this end, elements such as the incapacity for expression, the exposure of narrative procedures, and writing from the unknown and doubt—as an exercise—the violation of linguistic logic, rendering it metaphorical, lyrical, suggestive, and fragmented, will serve as common denominators in the narrative development. Narrators tormented by unknown fate—both their own and that of their characters—will dwell on the impossibility and limits of written expression as they tentatively trace their own story.

### 3 The Construction of Rodrigo S. M.

According to Rosenfeld (1996, p. 81, our translation<sup>10</sup>), for “[...] each historical phase, there exists a certain *Zeitgeist*, a unifying spirit that permeates all cultural manifestations in contact.” A narrator like Rodrigo, the writer of an “[...] unfinished book because it’s still waiting for an answer” (Lispector, 2011, p. xiv), whose chest carries “an emptiness of soul [...]” (Lispector, 2011, p. 6), reflects what we conventionally understand as the modern subject. In his narrative, we find elements such as disorientation, the endorsement of individualism, a fragmented world, science divided into disciplines, a complex society, the impossibility of expression through words, a blurred consciousness, and the abandonment of an omniscient stance. In other words, the peculiarities of modernity are aesthetically imprinted on the novel, both in content and form.

Rodrigo fragments Macabéa’s trajectory amid gaps filled with metaphysical and literary reflections. Neither the hurdles of writing—which do not come easily to him—nor the rare events in the narrative, nor the construction of his own identity occur in a linear fashion. The narrator of *The Hour of the Star* frequently embarks on philosophical digressions, only to then sketch fragmentary, if not mysterious, aspects of the character glimpsed fleetingly—in passing, in the face of a young Northeastern woman.

The core of the first part of the work, when Macabéa is still presented in a fragmented manner, is filled by Rodrigo with the creative anxiety that only metalinguistic reflection can impart: “So suddenly the idea of surpassing my own limits fascinated me. And that’s when I thought about reality, since reality was so beyond me. Whatever ‘reality’ means” (Lispector, 2011, p. 9). In a

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<sup>10</sup> “[...] cada fase histórica existe certo *Zeitgeist*, um espírito unificador que se comunica a todas as manifestações de culturas em contato”. (Rosenfeld, 1996, p. 81)

loquacious style, the narrator/writer engages in a kind of self-reflective maieutic process. Rodrigo offers the reader a vivid experience composed of various reflections, often shifting abruptly from one passage to another without warning, without adhering to the traditional organization of paragraphs. Ideas follow the typical erratic leaps of the stream of consciousness; therefore, they are not arranged so that each passage exclusively addresses a specific point, as is customary with traditional narrators.

Rodrigo presents himself through contradictions—both accessible and mysterious. He claims to be simple, as in: “Make no mistakes, I only achieve simplicity with enormous effort” (Lispector, 2011, p. 3); yet his style displaces meaning from its usual context, and those small Claricean surprises emerge:

Naturally, like every writer I’m tempted to use succulent terms: I know splendid adjectives, meaty nouns, and verbs so slender that they travel sharp through the air about to go into action, since words are actions, don’t you agree? (Lispector, 2011, p. 7)

Not only are the structure and themes fragmented here—*The Hour of the Star* itself was composed through a process of linear disintegration. Like Rodrigo, Clarice draws near only to pull away—her manuscripts reveal a work in progress. The photographs included in the Brazilian commemorative edition highlight the thirty-four different types of paper used in the manuscript—from check stubs to the backs of shopping lists, from lined sheets to hastily scribbled notes. It is evident that Clarice also scattered her writing, and that her moments of work were neither planned nor linear. Both Clarice and her final narrator decelerate, interrupt, pause, and engage in reflections, questions, and parentheses.

I see a desire to engage with time differently—nonlinear, simultaneous, composed of overlapping moments—which suggests a new meaning for writing: one that does not move in a single direction but rather spreads throughout the house—into drawers, bags, folders—occupying the unexpected spaces assigned to it by Clarice’s scattered notes, waiting to be gathered by the many hands of archivists. (Vidal, 2017, pp. 29–30, our translation<sup>11</sup>)

In this example of how time is handled, we can identify yet another element that defines modern narrators. The narrative time is by no means the past, but rather the most immediate present: “[...] we live exclusively in the present [...]” (Lispector, 2011, p. 10); or “This all happens in the year it is

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<sup>11</sup> “Vejo o desejo de lidar com o tempo de outra maneira, não linear, simultâneo, de instantes que se sobrepõem, o que significa um outro sentido para a escrita, que não vai numa única direção, mas se espalha pela casa, pelas gavetas, bolsas, pastas, ocupando o espaço inesperado que lhe designam as notas espalhadas por Clarice, a serem recolhidas pelas muitas mãos dos arquivistas.” (Vidal, 2017, p. 29-30)

happening” (Lispector, 2011, p. 24). Rodrigo even claims that the book he is writing is sponsored by the most famous soft drink in the world—a soda that tastes terrible but is famous because it tastes like today, a flavor that brings you up to date (Lispector, 2011).

The immediacy mentioned above—born of the estrangement and disorientation experienced by the modern individual—also results in a suspension of belief in the narrator. The past, as previously stated, is the verbal tense most subject to verification and apprehension. Without a clearly marked past, Rodrigo is read with suspicion. We do not know who he is: small fragments of information are offered drop by drop, and even then, much continues to elude us.

Moreover, Rodrigo S. M. is openly deceitful: “And I only lie precisely when it’s time to lie” (Lispector, 2011, p. 10). The abandonment of the comfortable position of the credulous witness—that is, the break with the superior and omniscient narrator—emerged for Brazilian readers with the works of Machado de Assis. Similarly, the dialogue established by Rodrigo often asserts itself with irony and seeks to win us over through frankness and expansiveness (Vidal, 2017). According to Dalcastagnè (2000), instead of a supreme subject who knows and controls everything, we are guided by someone who stumbles through discourse—a suspicious narrator with a clouded consciousness or imprecise intentions.

In addition to what has already been mentioned, the narrator of this thirteen-titled work may also be identified as an unreliable narrator due to his frequent emphasis on the abyss between being and language: “My truest life is unrecognizable, extremely interior and there is not a single word that defines it” (Lispector, 2011, p. 3). Rodrigo’s inability to fully articulate what he wishes to convey is yet another hallmark of the modern narrator. What is spoken is more effectively expressed through suggestion than through clarity: “Things that can be defined are starting to fatigue me a bit. I prefer the truth that is in the foreboding.” (Lispector, 2011, p. 21).

Tied to the notion of a poetics of negativity is the problematization of literature per se. Questions such as “Why do I write?”, “How do I write?”, and “Who reads me?”—as well as the social marginalization of the writer—are raised repeatedly:

What else? Yes, I have no social class, marginalized as I am. The upper class considers me a weird monster, the middle class worries I might unsettle them, the lower class never comes to me. (Lispector, 2011, p. 10)

Or even: “I am absolutely tired of literature; only muteness keeps me company. If I still write it’s because I have nothing better to do in the world while I wait for death.” (Lispector, 2011, p. 61).

The questioning of the role of literature and its possible ramifications is one of the elements that support the hypothesis that the narrator of *The Hour of the Star* could only have written it while grounded in modern artistic frameworks. Within this sphere, the unveiling of artistic processes also comes to the fore. Two crucial, surprising moments—unprecedented in Brazilian literature—serve as examples.

The first of these is the supposed reproduction of Macabéa and Olímpico's first encounter. Rodrigo writes: "The following is just an attempt to reproduce three pages I wrote and that my cook, seeing them lying around, threw away to my despair [...]" (Lispector, 2011, p. 34). Never before had a narrator so thoroughly externalized the creative process itself—marked by external interference and personal discouragement.

The second moment we refer to concerns the pauses made by the writer—something previously unimaginable within a narrative, but here presented very clearly:

I have to interrupt this story for about three days. For the last three days, alone, without characters, I depersonalize myself and take myself off as if taking off clothes. I depersonalize myself so much that I fall asleep. And now I emerge and miss Macabea. Let's continue: (Lispector, 2011, p. 61-2).

Supported by the principles mentioned, Rodrigo S. M. can be regarded as a modern narrator of original richness and a contemporary worldview. Nevertheless, the construction of his identity in opposition to the Other—more specifically, Macabéa and Clarice—will be addressed in a separate section.

#### 4 Fragmented identity in contrast

The novel begins with a dedication by the author—"actually Clarice Lispector" (Lispector, 2011, p. xiii), in parentheses—dedicated to her former poverty, to renowned musicians, and to

[...] all those prophets of the present and who have foretold me to myself until in that instant I exploded into: I. This I that is all of you since I can't stand being just me, I need others in order to get by [...] (Lispector, 2011, p. xiii)

By invoking the name of Clarice and so many other artists, Rodrigo establishes a quite peculiar game with the reader. First, there is the fictional distancing of Clarice's figure within Rodrigo's existence. Clarice is Rodrigo, yet not exactly, for this story requires coldness and "[...] because a woman would make it all weepy and maudlin." (Lispector, 2011, p. 6). The Other who constitutes him is the author herself—revealed yet denied, masterfully mocking. The clash and encounter

between the Self and the Other are pillars of the estrangement typical of modern literature. It is up to the reader to find a way to respond to the uncanny invitation extended by Rodrigo, who is in truth Clarice, writing in a masculine voice. Clarice Lispector, disguising herself as a man, clearly challenges the criticism that often labels her work as feminine literature and never universal. This displacement resonates not only in the structure and content of the narrative but also in extratextual spheres.

In addition to his polarization with Clarice, Rodrigo forges his identity in opposition to Macabéa. The narrator is eager to distinguish himself from her. He is everything the Alagoan woman lacks (Dalcastagnè, 2000). He begins by adopting behaviors that are not his in order to write her. To speak of the girl, he cannot shave for days, only naps when exhausted, and wears old, torn clothes. While he writes at home eating fruit and drinking chilled white wine, Macabéa chews pieces of paper, thinking about beef thigh. He is a writer and wields words; she is an incompetent typist. Rodrigo is metaphysical; Macabéa is carnal—endlessly hungry, with yellowed eyes and lustfulness. The narrator learned French by ear; the skinny orphan is unaware of what she does not know, like “[...] a stray dog was guided exclusively by herself” (Lispector, 2011, p. 10).

Thus, a relationship of disdain and shock is established. Rodrigo clearly marks the distances that separate him; he looks at Macabéa sometimes with love, sometimes with hatred. In a maneuver of guilt and defense, he constructs Macabéa—the only way he can protect himself. “Am I a monster or is this what it means to be a person?” (Lispector, 2011, p. 7). This dichotomy between Rodrigo S. M. and Macabéa reveals a relationship marked by the tension between creation and otherness. Rodrigo builds his narrative identity through contrasts. This distancing is not only physical or intellectual but also symbolic, encapsulating the hierarchy between the narrator as creator and the character as the object of his creation.

By “performing” behaviors to approach Macabéa’s reality, Rodrigo reveals an inherent paradox: on one hand, he affirms the necessity of understanding his character; on the other, he reinforces the abyss that separates them. This ambivalence—love and disdain, guilt and defense—is what drives the narrative. The narrator, in constructing Macabéa, seems to project onto her the aspects he rejects in himself, using her as a distorted mirror that reflects his own existential crisis. Rodrigo’s anguish about his role as narrator, observer, and agent of Macabéa’s literary and symbolic

destruction echoes the violence implicit in the act of narrating: the author-narrator wields absolute power over fictional life, while simultaneously confronting the humanity he attributes to his creation. Thus, Rodrigo S. M. not only narrates but embodies the contradictions of the modern, manifesting the fissures between being and narrating, between language and experience.

### Final considerations

The final text of a great writer—one which will once again become a mystery, a star among stars, a molecule among molecules—called for a very particular narrator. This ultimate work, so brief and intense, asks: what is an author? What is a narrator? (Cixous, 2017).

Only a narrator like Rodrigo—fragmented, unusual, unreliable, and modern—could give Macabéa the seed of the future. The experience of human personality.

[...] from the precariousness of their situation in a chaotic world, rapidly changing, shaken by warlike cataclysms, immense collective movements, astonishing technical advances which, unleashed by human action, come to threaten and dominate man. (Rosenfeld, 1991, pp. 86-87, our translations<sup>12</sup>)

In *The Hour of the Star*, Clarice Lispector embodies all the constitutive elements of modern literature. Her last book published during her lifetime presents the consciousness of a narrator who lives only as long as it lives its story. Once the character dies, the narrator dies: “And now—now all I can do is light a cigarette and go home. My God, I just remembered that we die. But—but me too?!” (Lispector, 2011, p. 77).

The dissolution of the narrator with Macabéa’s death reveals the visceral dependence between creator and creature in *The Hour of the Star*. Rodrigo S. M. does not exist outside the narrative; its identity is forged by the experience of narrating Macabéa’s story, so that its voice, reflections, and even contradictions disintegrate at the end of the character’s life. This conclusion underlines the fragility of the modern narrator, who is defined not by omnipotence but by ephemerality and self-awareness of its role.

The final passage — with its meditation on death — emphasizes how the narrator inevitably finds itself dragged into the same existential void it attributes to its creation. Thus, Clarice Lispector

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<sup>12</sup> [...] da precariedade da sua situação num mundo caótico, em rápida transformação, abalado por cataclismos guerreiros, imensos movimentos coletivos, espantosos progressos técnicos que, desencadeados pela ação do homem, passam a ameaçar e dominar o homem. (Rosenfeld, 1991, p. 86-87)

radically synthesizes the dilemmas of modern literature: fiction as a transient space where narrator and character intertwine in their shared crises and finitudes.

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