

LITERATURE ASSESSMENT COVER SHEET 2020–21

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Module Title and Code	UQ310822: 'Avant-garde literature'
Assessment No. and Description	Essay 2
Essay Question/Title/No.	<i>'Write a critical analysis of the treatment and portrayal of the individual protagonist(s), and their interactions with others and/or society in general'</i>
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Clarice Lispector is a writer of world renown for her writing of characters who are ‘alienated and searching for meaning in life,’ and who ‘gradually gain a sense of awareness of themselves and accept their place in an arbitrary, yet eternal, universe’.¹ In her novel ‘The Hour of the Star’ this development and personal growth is first and foremost seen through its characters’ initial portrayal by the author. Their treatment as characters – and protagonists of the work - is then furthered as the novel continues. This character development could not exist within a vacuum however, as the protagonists need to interact with and react to other characters, and with the confines and constructs of society itself, to come out of the other side having developed in one way or another. In this essay I will be focusing on the two characters who could be considered the protagonists of ‘The Hour of the Star’ – the narrator, and Macabéa.

Lispector, speaking through her novel’s narrator, states to the reader that ‘the story – I determine with false free will – will have around seven characters and I’m obviously one of the more important. I, Rodrigo S.M.’.² That seven-character total however, includes characters that I would deem as more secondary to the protagonists – as such, I classify Macabéa and the narrator to be the only real protagonists of the piece. Now that the classification of who are the ‘protagonists’ has been dealt with, we can venture forth into the literature itself – to determine their treatment and portrayal. It may seem trivial, but the fact that Clarice Lispector chose to use her own voice – albeit through a character - as the narrator, yet making them a man is an integral part of their portrayal in the novel. As prominent Feminist writer Hélène Cixous details; ‘a metamorphosis proceeds the writing of the text. Clarice will write as a man. All women writers have done it, but with her, it is voluntary, both as a game and a serious business’.³ The sex of the narrator is made evident to the reader before the novel-proper has even begun, as gendered language is used in the ‘Dedication by the Author’ – the narrator himself writes; ‘to the very crimson color scarlet like the blood of a man in his prime and so I dedicate it to my blood’⁴. He also goes on to

¹ ‘Clarice Lispector: Brazilian Author’, *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (July 20, 1998)
<<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Clarice-Lispector>> [accessed: 13/12/2020]

² Lispector, Clarice, *The Hour of the Star* (London : Penguin : 2011) p.05

³ Cixous, Hélène, ‘The Hour of the Star: How does one Desire Wealth or Poverty?’, in *Reading with Clarice Lispector* (Minneapolis, MIN : University of Minnesota Press : 1990) p.149

⁴ Lispector, Clarice, ‘Dedication by the Author’, *The Hour of the Star* (London : Penguin : 2011) p.xiii

write of their youth, stating that; ‘I as a boy grew up in the northeast’.⁵ Lispector also portrays her narrator as a man without limits when it comes to portraying the events with as much realism and empathy as possible. With a similar philosophy to that of a method-actor, the narrator is portrayed as almost excessive in his desire to fairly portray his own characters – he writes that; ‘It’s not comfortable now: to speak of the girl I can’t shave for days and must acquire dark circles under my eyes from lack of sleep, nodding off from sheer exhaustion, I am a manual laborer. Besides wearing rugged old clothes. All in order to put myself on the northeastern girl’s level. But still aware that I might have to present myself in a more convincing way to the societies that demand a great deal of the person sitting her typing’.⁶ Cinthya Torres, writing in 2017 for ‘Inti: Revista de Literatura Hispánica’, reiterates on this, believing it to be progressive regarding the other protagonist’s portrayal, stating that; ‘by placing her conflicted narrator and the helpless protagonist side by side in *The Hour of the Star*, she takes a frank look at the Other, challenging the reader to reevaluate his views and preconceptions on poverty, justice, and empathy reflecting on the creative process of writing’.⁷

That is not to say, however, that the narrator is sure-footed in his regard for Macabéa, the other protagonist of the novel. Lispector, through her narrator, goes through the natural motions when being invested in a character of one’s own creation – they become part of you, yet you learn to love them as with any other being. At the start, the narrator finds that; ‘I seem to know the tiniest details about this northeastern girl, after all I live with her and because I’ve guessed so much about her, she’s stuck to my skin like some sticky treacle or black mud [...] well the typist doesn’t want to get off my shoulders. Me of all people who realises that poverty is ugly and promiscuous’.⁸ This is detailed further by Deborah J. Archer, writing in ‘Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women’ that; ‘*The Hour of the Star (A hora da estrela)* exposes and explores the self-conscious ambivalence with which Lispector approaches the creation of her protagonist’.⁹ This development of unsure emotion, of ‘self-conscious ambivalence’ is developed as the

⁵ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.xiii

⁶ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p. 11

⁷ Toress, Cinthya, ‘On Poverty and the Representation of the Other in *The Hour of the Star*’, in *Inti: Revista de Literatura Hispánica*, No. 85 : Article. 14 (April 2017) p.197

⁸ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.05

⁹ Archer, Deborah J., ‘Receiving the Other: The Feminine Economy of Clarice Lispector’s *The Hour of the Star*’, *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women*, Ed. Carol J. Singley and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (Albany, NY : University of New York : 1993), p.253

narrative – and, ergo, narration – continues; at the beginning of the novel Rodrigo admits that; ‘it’s true that I too have no pity for my main character, the northeastern girl: it’s a story I want to be cold. But I have the right to be sadly cold, and you don’t. So that’s why I won’t let you’.¹⁰ This emotionless regard for Macabéa as a simple device to keep the narrative churning along is then broken down until a true affection for her seems to form within him, until he – in the last quarter of the novel – proclaims that; ‘Yes, I’m in love with Macabéa, my dear Maca, in love with her ugliness and total anonymity since she belongs to no one. In love with her weak lungs, the scrappy girl’.¹¹

That is not to say, however, that all portrayals of the narrator are positive – in fact, one of the reasons behind Lispector’s gender-swapped narrator is so that a powerful figure – representing the patriarchal establishment – could be inserted into her novel. As such, that view can be established, heard, and then dismissed through the writing – as Dara Malina wrote in 2015; ‘Rodrigo as man carries prejudice in his vantage of Macabéa, allowing for commentary on how men view women’.¹² This opinion of the aforementioned ‘patriarchal establishment’ can be seen as he makes what, at first, seems like a self-detrimental compliment which then forms into a misogynistic opinion regarding the ability of female writers; ‘even what I’m writing somebody else could write. A male writer that is, because a woman would make it all weepy and maudlin’ – this is made all the more satirical and provoking as it is, obviously, a woman writing these words from behind the literary curtain.¹³ The interesting aspect of this novel’s narration is that the narrator is himself a tangible character, and as such is not just an omnipotent being, but a character in his own right who can judge and be cruel in his treatment of the characters under omnipresence. As such, a narrator has to narrate something – or, someone; in this case, the life of our second protagonist, Macabéa.

At first seeming inconspicuous; ‘a nineteen-year-old, indigent, uneducated woman from the backwoods of impoverished northeastern Brasil’, she is cast further into the realm of

¹⁰ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.05

¹¹ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.59

¹² Malina, Dara, ‘The Hour of the Star or Adaption of a Novella or Existential Crisis or An Exercise in Abjection or The Real or The Essence or Soemthing Else or The Past Three Years or The Present Future or Stream-of-Consciousness Brain Vomit or Intellectual Inquiry or Creative Outpouring or Who Am I?’, *Columbia University Thesis: Master of Fine Arts: Theatre Arts* (2015)

<<https://academiccommons.columbia.edu/doi/10.7916/D84F1Q0T>> [accessed: 12/12/2020]

¹³ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.06

obscurity as she is described as being been; ‘born with a rap sheet and now looked like the daughter of nobody in particular apologizing for taking up space.’¹⁴¹⁵ The portrayal of our protagonist as a ‘nobody’, or even someone less than a ‘nobody’, is further developed as she herself struggles to describe her personality as she awoke one morning. In the end she found herself again, yet by then it was made apparent that there wasn’t much to gather to begin with; ‘when she woke up she no longer knew who she was. Only later did she think with satisfaction: I’m a typist and a virgin, and I like coca-cola. Only then did she dress herself in herself, she spent the rest of the say playing the role of being’.¹⁶ As Earl E. Fitz detailed for ‘Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas’, she is; ‘both a painful portrait of a human life wasted and a searing indictment of the effects of poverty and abandonment on the human creature’.¹⁷ Macabéa is portrayed as a young woman of immense patience and kindness, whether through goodness of heart or a lack of understanding; ‘that girl didn’t know she was what she was, just as a dog doesn’t know it’s a dog. So she didn’t feel unhappy. The only thing she wanted was to live. She didn’t know for what, she didn’t ask questions’ but also of no great physical beauty.¹⁸ As is written; ‘in the mirror she distractedly examined close up the blotches on her face. In Alagoas they were called “panos”, they said it was something to do with the liver. She concealed her panos with a thick layer of white powder [...] all of her was a bit grimy since she rarely washed. During the day she wore a blouse and skirt, at night she slept in her underwear. A roommate never knew how to tell her she smelled stale’.¹⁹ She is further described as being a woman ‘who in all appearances was asexual’.²⁰ Malina comments on this, detailing how; ‘the author is slowly building this character from the outside-in and here she is establishing her sexless body. Her body is “othered” and she is “othered” in comparison to the company of poor girls who prostitute themselves on the streets of Rio de Janeiro’.²¹

¹⁴ Archer, *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women*, p.256

¹⁵ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.18

¹⁶ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.27

¹⁷ Fitz, Earl E., ‘Clarice Lispector as a Northeastern Writer’ in *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas*, Vol.49 : Issues 1-2 (February 2017) p.46

¹⁸ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.19

¹⁹ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.18

²⁰ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.26

²¹ Malina, *Columbia University Thesis: Master of Fine Arts: Theatre Arts*

As Will Stegal writes; ‘it is difficult to look at and truly appreciate a novel written about a diverse country like Brasil without looking at it through a diverse set of viewpoints’.²² And he couldn’t be more right, while our protagonists are portrayed in certain ways to represent particular aspects of society – or, in Macabéa’s case, the realm lying outside of it – the treatment they receive extends to their interactions with others. While we’ve already covered the narrator’s treatment the story’s main focus – the other protagonist – Macabéa lives in a world of interactions, a world of ‘diverse sets of viewpoints’. What I would deem as her most influential interaction with another character is her short-lived romantic relationship with Olimpico. Olimpico is as cruel as Macabéa is dim, yet she has in her head a model of life on which she hopes to one day fulfil – and a husband, in Olimpico, is part of that model. However, her interactions with him are not positive, as Marta Peixoto so succinctly puts; ‘next begins a desultory relationship, in which Macabéa is the object of Olimpico’s insults and an audience for his fantasies of grandeur. He soon abandons her to take up with her office mate Gloria’.²³ It begins in a very promising way, with an almost cliché meet-cute between the two characters. Both are both originally from the same region of Brazil, and they notice this similarity between them almost instantly; ‘she and the boy looked at each other in the middle of the rain and recognised each other as northeasterners, creatures of the same species sniffing each other out’.²⁴ However, as was detailed by Peixoto, this relationship soon turns sour as Olimpico treats Macabéa incredibly poorly - by verbally abusing her and by shining the spotlight on her flaws; her physical appearance and her lack of intelligence. He proclaims to her that ‘nobody looks at a girl like you’, and also asks her mid-conversation; ‘listen here: are you just pretending to be an idiot or are you actually an idiot?’²⁵ ²⁶ One such aspect of her appearance which was grasped onto by other characters, and is a reoccurring interaction between them, is her aforementioned skin condition. The ‘blotches on her face’ are a point of embarrassment to Macabéa, and as such she looks to her icons for inspiration on how to look, and how to cover them up.²⁷ As she confides in Olimpico; ‘you know what I want more than anything else in the world? To be a movie star [...] did you know that

²² Stegal, Will, ‘Broader Implications of Clarice Lispector’s *The Hour of the Star*’, *Texas Christian University: Research Seminar in Global Literature: English 38033* (February 2015)

<http://www.academia.edu/download/37575763/Hour_of_the_Star_Essay.docx>

²³ Peixoto, Marta, *Passionate Fictions: Gender, Narrative, and Violence in Clarice Lispector* (Minneapolis, MIN : University of Minnesota Press : 1994), p.90

²⁴ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.34

²⁵ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.47

²⁶ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.44

²⁷ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.18

Marilyn Monroe was all pink?’²⁸ However his reaction is less than reassuring, as he does not support her, instead retorting; ‘and you’re all dirt. You don’t have the face or body to be a movie star’.²⁹ Lucia Villares, writing in the ‘Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies’, details Macabéa’s altered, sickly, skin; ‘Macabéa is physically not fit for the world in which she lives and a lot of this is due to the fact that her colour is wrong [...] her skin colour is perceived as dirty and she is often described as yellowish’.³⁰ In summation, her interaction – and eventual relationship - with Olimpico, while being formative to her character was nothing but detrimental. As is written by the narrator himself; ‘the only nice thing he did for Macabéa was tell her he’d find her a job in the metal factory when she got fired’.³¹

While not integral to Macabéa’s life for as long as Olimpico, the fortune-teller who Macabéa is guided towards by her friend Gloria arguably had just as much of an impact on her life. Her fortune of a multi-coloured eyed European lover gives Macabéa hope in the final pages of the novel, and pivots her world view completely. As the narrator himself notes; ‘Just as you can be sentenced to death, the fortune-teller had sentenced her to life [...] she felt like crying. But she didn’t: her eyes glistened like the dying sun’.³² her interaction with the fortune-teller, and the fortune of her mysterious lover was so powerful that it was able to heal the hole of grief left behind by Olimpico’s departure; ‘she’s forgotten Olimpico and could only think of the foreigner: what luck to get a man with blue or green or brown or black eyes, you couldn’t go wrong, the range of possibilities was vast’.³³

While the interactions between Macabéa and the other characters of ‘The Hour of the Star’ are definitely impactful, the core of Macabéa’s struggle concerns her interaction not with individuals but with society as a whole. Whole facets of her being are shaped and moulded by those interactions. Stegal details this overarching question of personhood, writing; ‘what exactly makes an individual who they are? Gender? Name? Geography? Affiliations? Race? Beliefs? Each is important in shaping one’s identity in its own right. However it is the combination of these that forms a complete package’.³⁴ One evident aspect of Macabéa’s

²⁸ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.45

²⁹ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.45

³⁰ Villares, Lucia, ‘Racism and the Performance of Whiteness in A Hora da Estrella’, in the *Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, Vol.14 : No.2-3 (August/December 2008) p.77

³¹ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.49

³² Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.70

³³ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.69

³⁴ Stegal, *Texas Christian University: Research Seminar in Global Literature: English 38033*

identity which is influenced by her interaction with society is that of her gender. As she is a character created by a writer who has ‘come to embody the *écriture féminine*’ her struggle against the patriarchal systems of society, which are evident from the opening regards of the narrator, should not come as a surprise.³⁵ Macabéa’s struggle to find her footing as a woman in a society that is antiquated in its treatment of its female citizens in ‘The Hour of the Star’ is a perfect ‘illustrat[ion] [of] the dissention between gender and power’.³⁶ And shows very clearly the ‘overlapping systems of oppression’ she has to face, yet also shows her defeat – as ‘a young woman absolutely crushed by them’.³⁷ One such interaction Macabéa has with Brazilian society is with regards to childbearing – and its apparent importance in society’s definition of womanhood. Once it has become apparent to Olimpico that Macabéa would be unable to become pregnant, she is disregarded by him – as he deems her not a ‘full woman’ – as the narrator points out; ‘Olimpico in fact showed no satisfaction in dating Macabéa – that’s what I’m discovering now. Olimpico might have seen that Macabéa didn’t have the strength of breeding, she was a subproduct’.³⁸ Olimpico then jumps straight into a relationship with Macabéa’s friend Gloria who, among other things, would very clearly be able to produce children; ‘from her hips you could tell Gloria was made for childbearing. Whereas Macabéa seemed to have herself her own end’.³⁹ This is highlighted as it is noted by the narrator - of the disrepair of Macabéa’s reproductive organs- that; ‘as was already said or not said Macabéa had ovaries shrivelled as a cooked mushroom’.⁴⁰

It’s not just the interactions that society does have with Macabéa that are harmful to her, but the lack of interaction is a massive component of her character as well. The narrator notes that Macabéa; ‘lives in an impersonal limbo, without reaching the worst or the best. She just lives, inhaling and exhaling, inhaling and exhaling. Actually – why should she do anything more? Her existence is sparse. Yes’.⁴¹ Her greatest interaction with society is at a safe distance, as the noises of life bustling about calm and soothe her; ‘she was quiet (not having anything to say) but she liked noises. They were life. Whereas the silence of the night was scary [...] at night cars rarely passed through Acre Street, the more they honked, the better

³⁵ Bilibija, Ksenija, ‘Review: [Untitled]’, *The Luso-Brazilian Review*, Vol.33 : No.01 (Summer 1996), p.152

³⁶ Ksenija, *The Luso-Brazilian Review* p.152

³⁷ Marting, D.E., *Clarice Lispector: A Bio-Biography* (Westport, CT : Greenwood : 1993), p.39

³⁸ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.50

³⁹ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.51

⁴⁰ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.50

⁴¹ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.15

she liked it'.⁴² The society in which Macabéa lives is a society in which she is one of many – a worker who is gladly kept uniformed and uneducated – as such, keeping them content, and staving off uprising and revolt. As is revealed, Macabéa; 'didn't even realize she lived in a technical society in which she was a dispensable cog'.⁴³ This interaction – or, again, lack thereof – can be seen, as Macabéa has a sudden revolutionary thought – only for it to pass all too quickly; 'she grew thoughtful. Maybe for the first time she defined herself in a social class. She thought, thought and thought! She concluded that nobody had ever actually offended her, everything that happened was because that's how things are and there was no struggle possible, struggle for what?'.⁴⁴ Macabéa is also left without a class construct to even feel solidarity within – this lack of interaction between her fellow class comrades could have spurred on some relationships which may have diminished some of the loneliness she most likely will have felt – she is not in absolute poverty, yet not comfortable enough to be content; 'the girl who at least didn't have to beg for food, there is a whole subclass that's even more lost and hungry'.⁴⁵ This lack of interaction between herself and a larger community outwith her own head is taken to a logical extreme where it is told to us that even God has disregarded her – not even God, who is the 'maker of [us] all' cares to interact with Macabéa.⁴⁶ The narrator reveals that 'the deities were strangers to her', and that; 'God didn't think about her. God belongs to those who manage to get him. God appears when you're distracted. She didn't ask questions. She guessed that there were no answers'.⁴⁷ ⁴⁸ This lack of interaction between Macabéa and society as a whole is brought to an ultimately-fatal closure as, while she is slowly bleeding to death in the penultimate pages of the novel, she is finally given the interaction she missed in her days amongst the masses of the living. She is finally noticed as she lies in a pool of her own blood, however – even then – it's an indifferent gathering of people she attracts, only mildly interested in her final moments; 'some people sprouted in the alleyway out of nowhere and gathered around Macabéa without doing anything just as people had always done for her, except that now at least they were glancing at her, which gave her an existence'.⁴⁹

⁴² Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.25

⁴³ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.21

⁴⁴ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.32

⁴⁵ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.21

⁴⁶ 'Proverbs 22:2', *King James Bible* < <https://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Proverbs-Chapter-22/> > [accessed: 13/12/2020]

⁴⁷ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.18

⁴⁸ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.21

⁴⁹ Lispector, *The Hour of the Star*, p.71-72

As mentioned at the very beginning of this essay, Clarice Lispector's characters are most definitely not one-note. They go through many trials and tribulations as protagonists; firstly, their portrayal by the author herself defines them – but not for long – and they are then treated by the world of the novel in ways which encourage development. They then interact with other characters to develop on a more personal scale, before interacting with society as a whole, and tackling those societal challenges and boundaries before they can then be considered 'fully-formed'.

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