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Animal Display in Fiction

Clarice Lispector's "*O búfalo*" and
Other Stories Framing Animal Captivity

Ana Carolina Torquato



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Ana Carolina Torquato

Abstract

This paper presents an overview of animal captivity and human-animal relationships in the context of the zoo. It endeavours to contextualize a possible definition of the themes of animal captivity and confinement; at the same time, it analyses how literary fiction portrays such topics. To illustrate the discussion, the study examines the short story "*O búfalo*" (1960), by Brazilian author Clarice Lispector, which portrays a woman visiting a zoological garden after a heartbreak. While wandering at the zoo, she observes animal behaviour while conducting a thorough excursion into her psychological and emotional self. Reflections on captivity, confinement, and lack of freedom are frequently addressed in Lispector's work and can also be found in other stories (*A paixão segundo G.H.*; "*A quinta história*"; "*A língua do 'p'*") that will also be taken into consideration.

Keywords: animal studies | Clarice Lispector | captivity

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1. Introduction

Clarice Lispector is one of the most important writers of Brazilian twentieth-century literature. She has a significant oeuvre and has been described by critics as one of the key figures of the Brazilian post-Modernist movement. Her prose is experimental both in form and content, using the stream of consciousness to investigate the female psyche, the complex relation to social conventions, its historical context, and the world. Moreover, her works often dedicate significant space to investigating how humans and animals interact in both literal and metaphorical representations.

Lispector's literary oeuvre is widely associated with animal representation and the analysis of human-animal relationships. The critical framework which analyses the author's work through the perspective of animal studies is vast (Amparo and Silva 2021; Maciel 2014, 2016, 2017; Malamud 1998).

Animals of various species are regularly portrayed in proximity to human beings in her works. Interestingly, Lispector's work does not rely on species hierarchy, because her narratives derive as much importance from non-charismatic animals, like insects and vermin, as it does from charismatic ones, like dogs or large mammals. They are associated with meaningful subjects such as companionship, race, gender, inequality, love, hate, and agency restriction, among others.

This study proposes to analyse one of Lispector's "zoo stories": the short story "*O búfalo*" ("The Buffalo", 1960; see Lispector 2016). This is a comparative study; therefore, it also probes how some other narratives by the same author use animal captivity and the representation of confinement to tackle key themes such as gender, and social and racial inequality. These themes are presented concerning the space of the zoological garden as an epitome of confinement and agency restriction but often refer to other types of material (spatial or architectural) or immaterial (culture and political) regulators. They are analysed regarding the concept of convivial configurations, "in which the connection between conviviality, difference and inequality is embedded" (Mecila 2019: 2) and which entails not only humans but also non-human animals.

In this sense, this working paper examines how the space of the zoological garden becomes the foundation for the analogies presented in the story. In addition, it examines the recurrent woman-animal symbolism explored in the texts as a sophisticated literary technique which is used to investigate the complexity of human-animal relationships and women's psychology. The study also refers to other works by Lispector which present similar traits to stress the importance of such imagery in the author's texts and to enrich the argument: the novella *A Paixão Segundo G.H.* (1964) and the short stories "*A quinta história*" and "*A língua do 'p'*" (Lispector 1988, 2016).

This work sums up my research during the Mecila fellowship in 2022; therefore, it includes some of the initial investigations which are part of the theoretical framework used to consolidate the present work. The paper begins with a brief history of zoos to elucidate the colonialist history of zoos and its associations with confinement, which are both themes strongly present in Lispector's stories. It then surveys the concept of human and animal captivity/agency through ethological, philosophical, and historical perspectives. These concepts are key to the analysis for they strengthen the interdisciplinary character of the study, as well as function as conductive threads through the argumentation. The following section reflects on the rise of the literary zoo, that is, a concept reflecting on the literary representation of zoological gardens, both literally and symbolically. Finally, the last section of the study centres on the analysis of selected literary texts by Clarice Lispector in connection to the discussion presented.

The discussion demonstrates the recurrence of themes such as captivity, confinement and agency restraint employed as metaphors to critically address gender roles, racial struggles, and inequality in Lispector's work. These matters are important tools to draw a psychological profile of the characters, as well as discuss fictional representations of animals in modern literature.

2. A Brief History of Zoos

Humans and animals have experienced millennia of joint conviviality. Whether in simple proximity or in a regime of domesticity, humans and animals have shared food, work, living spaces, history, and affection, among other aspects of human-animal lives.

From pre-literary history until the beginning of the urban revolution, animals of varied species shared the same living spaces as human beings. In certain situations, the living proximity between humans and animals was perceived as an indicator of social rank. While the poor would share their household with animals which were part of their subsistence (e.g., cows, pigs, horses, sheep, chicken, etc), the wealthy would maintain private exotic animal collections known as menageries to publicly display their power.

The upsurge of modernity, however, significantly altered the interaction between humans and animals. Urbanization, sanitation, public health, and scientific research combined have reassessed and reorganized human-animal relationships. After the rise of modernization, animals were impeded from navigating the centre of the modern city. They were either redirected to the urban outskirts or restricted to the rural areas. This was a historical turning point regarding the shared conviviality between humans and non-human animals, for their living ways were drastically changed. The private animal collections, on the other hand, evolved into what we know today as modern zoological gardens. The zoos were created amidst these changes of both the desire

to re-accommodate animal life within urban grounds, but also to give place to scientific aspirations, an exhibition of power and status, and the wish to understand the natural world.

Zoos have a long and multifaceted history. In antiquity, there are reports of animals in captivity within cities in places as diverse as Egypt, China, or Greece. Likewise, private collections of exotic animals (later to be identified by scholars as menageries), could be found in pre-Columbian Americas, in Ming China, or Renaissance Europe. They served the purpose of entertaining the upper classes, satisfying proto-scientific curiosity, and demonstrating power and wealth.

Animal collections and animal displays of various kinds became more common with the beginning of European expansionism, due to the material contribution of early colonial settlers or nature explorers. For instance, widely known voyagers and explorers, such as Alexander von Humboldt, Alfred Russel Wallace, or Henry Walter Bates “generally financed their expeditions by the sale of specimens [collected during their trips] on their return” (Lawrence 2015). These transactions were later transformed into what R. J. Hoage and William Deiss discuss in their book *New Worlds, New Animals* (1996) as the colonial history of zoos. The authors demonstrate the association of zoos with the rise of colonialism and imperialism:

From the start, exotic animals were fascinating to the peoples concentrated in north temperate regions. It was principally after the European navigators commenced their great oceanic voyages that new fauna and flora became a rich source of bioexhibits. Once the Age of Exploration was underway, leading eventually to colonization and empire building, temperate-region voyagers encountered the biological wealth of the tropics worldwide. As a result, major public zoos sprang up all over Europe and in North America. This process started in capital cities, spread into provinces, and then secondarily spread to the empires controlled from Europe (Hoage and William A. Deiss 1996: vii).

The import/export of animals became quite popular with the growing popularity of the modern zoo. Therefore, many explorers from around the world started creating expeditions to the Global South to import exotic fauna to be displayed in some of the largest zoos in Europe and the United States.

Once zoos became public institutions, visiting them evolved to be a popular form of family entertainment. Visitors are fascinated by the illusion of being inside a replica of nature, a possibility which allows spectators to observe or be in contact with animals and experience a glimpse of what it is like to be “in the wild”. In this sense, zoos became a safe place where humans can study the behaviour of wild and exotic animals without having to look for them in the wild.

Beyond entertainment, zoological gardens also aspired to better understand and catalogue the natural world. The display of animals and spatial organization within the zoo reflected some of the scientific aspirations of its time. As Hoage and Deiss reveal, the increasing growth of zoos as public institutions represent a practical turn of an objective and more organised way of understanding nature outside the natural history books. Zoos “[...] reflected the post-Linnaean passion for classification. Zoos labored to exhibit a comprehensive range of species: they also competed with one another to exhibit as many different kinds of animals as possible” (Hoage and William A. Deiss 1996: x).

The need to catalogue nature is soon extended to all types of beings, including human beings. Amidst this context emerged the human exhibitions or, as they were popularly called, the human zoos. Human zoos gained popularity during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as zoological gardens and world fairs in various places around the world served as stages for the display of non-White human beings alongside captive animals (Andreassen 2020: 1). They rapidly multiplied and were intimately used in the scientific discourse to claim biological superiority of a selected few peoples and to legitimize imperialist expansions. In this sense, a visit to the zoo would represent not only an opportunity to observe different animal species but also, in some cases, different ethnicities side by side. So, besides being sites destined for human entertainment and animal display, zoos also became the centre of ethnical exhibitions and, consequently, racial disputes. These events contributed to the growing unpopularity of zoos throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Another fact that creates negative connotations around zoological gardens is that they operate via the confinement of animals in spaces which resemble prisons. Their spatial similarity to jails has been long discussed. Michel Foucault argues in his influential work *Discipline and Punish* that the panopticon model envisaged by Jeremy Bentham was likely modelled after the Versailles menagerie, constructed during the reign of Louis XIV (Foucault [1975] 1979). The panopticon is a disciplinary system of control consisting of a series of individual cells organized around a central observation tower. The space organization allows the main control to keep watch of inmates without being seen by them (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Pierre d’Aveline, The Royal Menagerie of Versailles during the reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715)



Source: Image on public domain (Wikipedia n. d.).

Besides probing the architectonical similarities between correctional facilities and zoos, Foucault also relates this concept to the rise of total institutions such as sanatoriums, prisons, and asylums. When posing the similarities between the old menagerie of the Versailles Palace and Bentham’s panopticon model, Foucault establishes an architectural, cultural, and historical relationship between a place destined for animal display and human punishment. Although the objective of incarceration is ethically different, there are similarities in terms of what it entails for human or non-human individuals who remain confined in a delimited space.

Despite the negative atmosphere surrounding the history of zoos, a positive association overlays the negative and lingers until the present times. This connection usually refers to fun and amusement and is often highlighted regardless of zoos’ colonialist past and non-environmentally friendly character.

The addition of public aquariums to the same edifices of zoological gardens attracted even more attention to these organisations. They emerged on the tail of modern zoological gardens, together with the rising interest of natural historians and amateurs in keeping marine life alive in artificial environments (Granata 2021). The challenges and difficulties of recreating the ocean biome on land were also part of the aquarium mania which appeared in Europe around the mid-nineteenth century. Furthermore, the successful collaboration between zoos and aquariums attracted even more attention to themselves since they were able to recreate natural environments in one specific

place. After these changes, people would be able to see terrestrial, aerial, and maritime animals in just one visit to the zoo. Consequently, people started to actively look forward to spending their time in the company of animals as opposed to being afraid of them. However, this achievement was only possible because of animal captivity.

3. Captivity

Today, zoological gardens are socially perceived as controversial. At the same time, they are commonly associated with enjoyment and fun, they are also targets of criticism due to the nature of their business: displaying captive animals primarily for the purpose of human entertainment (although this reality is usually concealed from the public most of the time).¹

To better understand the theme of captivity and agency restriction in Clarice Lispector's work, this study proposes a discussion on the various meanings of the term. That is, not only when it is applied to animals but also to humans. The following discussion draws arguments from specialists on animal behaviour and observation, as well as from philosophical considerations on the subject. The main objective of this discussion is to better understand the reasons why the author uses the zoo metaphor in her narrative and, also, how this fictional construction resonates in human life.

The formal definition of captivity according to the dictionary is "the situation in which a person or animal is kept somewhere and is not allowed to leave" (Cambridge Dictionary n. d.). According to this definition, captivity is a condition which is both associated with a physical space and the physical or moral restraints imposed on human or non-human animals. In sum, a captive being is an individual who is prevented from leaving a place where they are maintained in confinement.

Captivity is a concept which can also raise a complex ethical debate. Numerous scholars have examined the subject and the intricacies of its entanglements. Also, in *Discipline and Punish* for instance, Michel Foucault conducts a detailed debate over the topic of incarceration and confinement. In his work, Foucault identifies some of the key philosophical, moral, and ethical questions about the subject of punishment and imprisonment of human beings. Foucault argues that confinement can be argued not solely as a physical penalty, but as a type of punishment which, consequently, entails deprivation of agency and liberty of choice:

¹ This concealment is clear because zoological gardens work consistently to obscure the obvious maintenance of animals in confinement. Many modern zoos have adopted the Carl Hagenbeck model of displaying animals in an open-enclosure system of moats. The moat system gives the illusion the animals are roaming freely because they no longer rely on bars or cages. On the other hand, these spaces are still surrounded by electrified fences disguised as bushes to prevent the animals from leaving their enclosures.

It might be objected that imprisonment, confinement, forced labour, penal servitude, prohibition from entering certain areas, deportation – which have occupied so important a place in modern penal systems – are “physical” penalties: unlike fines, for example, they directly affect the body. But the punishment-body relation is not the same as it was in the torture during public executions. The body now serves as an instrument or intermediary: if one intervenes upon it to imprison it, or to make it work, it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property (Foucault [1975] 1979: 11).

According to Foucault, besides the impact on the physical body and the dispossession of agency, confinement has also a significant bearing on the mind. Human beings are notoriously gregarious, therefore, being secluded from society has noteworthy consequences on their mental health and basic physiological activities. Extended social isolation can lead to numerous problems, such as sleep deprivation, anxiety, hallucination, and abnormal behaviour, among others. Foucault acknowledges the complexity of the theme and launches a debate which has been discussed up to the present.

Human confinement is usually associated with correctional activities, as often remarked in Foucauldian studies. However, the purpose for such kind of practice may vary concerning its purpose; it can either be conducted with the intention – although in most times without success – to positively benefit the individual or society. For instance, although prisons are largely different from rehabilitation facilities, both types of institutions are based on similar principles which include confinement and agency restriction.

Animal confinement, on the other hand, is practised for different purposes which do not necessarily have the intention of modifying behaviour. Paul A. Rees, an authority on animal captivity, examines the subject in his book *Studying Captive Animals* (2015). Rees’s approach presents a broader understanding of captivity, and the definition used by the author is directly related to human control over animals and it even includes situations which are socially identifiable as positive:

[...] captive animals those that are, or have recently been, under the control of humans. This includes zoo and farm animals, companion animals and free-ranging feral animals, but not animals kept in laboratory conditions. In most cases they are confined in relatively small areas (or volumes) by fences, walls and other barriers, and are unable to escape. In some cases they are free-ranging but still remain closely associated with humans (Rees 2015: 4).

The author states that captive animals are the ones who have been “under the control of humans” and who are prevented from escaping the place where they live.

Surprisingly, Rees does not include what he calls “animals in laboratory conditions” as part of his concept of captive animals (Rees 2015: 4). This is possible, I believe, due to the complexity of the debate surrounding animal testing in order not to reduce the subject to a few lines.

In his text, the author also places animal companions or pets as captive animals. However unanticipated or even unplaced as it might seem, Rees’s categorization refers to the fact that the life of these animals is also limited to human rule and restrained to a delimited space, even though the relationship between humans and pets is usually mediated by affection and companionship. Pets need human action to attain most of their basic needs, such as feeding, going for a walk, grooming, etc.

Regardless of what species we are examining, animal behaviour changes according to the environment, their living situation and the individuals who surround them for “keeping animals in captivity inevitably restricts the range of behaviours that they are able to exhibit” (Rees 2015: 8). The debate gets even more complex when we add the zoo variation. Most animals who live in zoo captivity are wild animals, this is the main allure of these spaces: providing human-wild animal contact in a safe and controlled space.

So, how is zoo captivity different from that of other types of animals previously mentioned? Wild animals are notoriously less likely to fully adapt to captivity. They are undomesticated species or species whose living situation has had no human interference. Therefore, even though animals can live in captivity, there is an observable impact on their behaviour. Some examples of these changes are caused by the size of their assigned enclosures in zoos – large animals, such as jaguars, lions, elephants, gorillas, and giraffes depend on vast spaces to roam about, play and forage.

Foraging for food, for instance, is one of the central activities of wildlife. Animals need foraging not only to keep their fitness levels balanced but also to equalise the food chain. Another impact of captivity is on the mother-pup relationship, for captive animals are more prone to have abnormal “parental behaviours, which increases the chance that an infant will be abandoned or neglected by its genetic mother” (Mills and Marchant-Forde 2010: 4). In addition, there are also various species which experience difficulty in reproducing in captivity; some examples are the northern white rhino, the Hawaiian crow, and the whooping crane (Snyder et al. 1996: 340).

These atypical behaviours, particularly the challenges in reproduction, are attributed to various factors. These include a deficit in psychological, physiological, or environmental needs, insufficient dietary provisions, the impacts of being raised by humans, a lack of behavioural compatibility between individuals, and the negative consequences of

inbreeding. These conclusions have been drawn from a range of studies conducted over several years by different researchers (see Snyder et al. 1996: 339-340).

Other smaller-sized animals can also suffer from being confined in inappropriate spaces, causing a remarkably similar impact as the one noticeable in larger species. Although this has been changing in recent years, the history of zooarchitecture² demonstrates that animal enclosures are not always built envisaging animal well-being but rather to accommodate the available space for construction.³

In his article “Animal Agency: Captivity and Meaning”, philosopher Nicolas Delon reflects on animal agency in the state of captivity (Delon 2018). In his viewpoint, “[c]aptivity involves a specific type of restriction, which explains why captivity frustrates particular interests. When restrictions involve domination, or egregiously asymmetric power, they frustrate one’s interest in exercising one’s agency” (Delon 2018: 135). Therefore, animal captivity, as the author puts it, can be also directly related to power struggles and control. Delon also associates this lack of autonomy delegated to animals as also impactful on animal agency, that is, animals’ decision-making faculties and intentionality.

In this sense, it is not a surprise that zoological gardens have historically appeared in literary representation as a common analogy of confinement, societal restrictions, and the impossibility of exercising agency.

4. Agency

While agency regarding humans is somewhat of a consolidated concept, there is no homogeneous agreement in determining animal agency. In rough terms, agency is the capability of an individual to perform actions which are carried with intentionality and meaning, rather than just instinct. Therefore, attributing agency to an animal means recognizing “subjectivity in animal life by representing action as performed by, rather

2 I use a term I have consistently seen in the works by architect Natascha Meuser (ZooArc/Anhalt University). This term refers to the architecture of zoos.

3 The history of the architecture of zoos is full of examples of badly planned animal enclosures. A famous one is the London Zoo “Penguin Pool” built by renowned architect Berthold Lubetkin in the 1930s. The Penguin Pool is an example of a Modernist building and is today listed as Grade I structure in the United Kingdom; however, even though the pool became a landmark of modern architecture, it did not suit the needs of the penguins. The pool is small and shallow therefore, penguins cannot dive well. Specialists affirm that penguin enclosures must contain a pool which is at least 4 metres deep. Despite that, Lubetkin’s pool remained in use until 2004 and closed because the quartz material used to renovate the enclosure in the 1980s caused bumblefoot – a bacterial infection on the penguins’ feet. After closing the pool, the London Zoo constructed a new one which stands until today. Lubetkin’s Penguin Pool remains closed until now but is sometimes used to host musical concerts; recently, the pool has been used as a filming location for the video clip of the song “As It Was”, by British singer Harry Styles.

than happening to, animals” (Crist 1999: 40). Agency is a relational concept (Carter and Charles 2013), that is, it exists not only regarding the individual in question but also the environment and other actors that can similarly affect or change the course of the action first intended.

As Carter and Charles explain, whether the subject of discussion is human or animal agency, the “agential position” in which we find ourselves is usually involuntary and it comes with several consequences that are usually out of our range of control:

Moreover, our agential position is involuntary – we are born into a certain place at a certain moment – and, because the distribution of resources predates our arrival, it is indifferent to whatever stance we may or may not take up towards it. Yet through our placing in these distributions we share the advantages or disadvantages attached to them (being propertyless in a capitalist society, for instance, or female in a patriarchal one). It is through our historically specific and contingent locations in society’s distribution of resources that we become inexorably enmeshed with the structural and cultural relations of society (Carter and Charles 2013: 331).

This is surely the case when discussing matters such as human social rank, gender, or race, for instance.

The authors affirm that animals are usually on the weaker side of the human-animal relationship when examining the subject of animal agency. The human-animal bond has evolved to be guided by a dynamic of power and inequality since humans have achieved the means to rule over animals and the natural world, “[...] there can be little doubt that most animals are placed in a highly disadvantaged location within a human-centred distribution of resources, precisely because they are non-human animals in an agential relation to human animals” (Carter and Charles 2013: 331).

Animal agency is a concept which has recently been included as part of the scientific and humanities discourses. The acknowledgement that animals are sentient beings capable of performing intentional actions has become more widely accepted with the advancement of fields of study such as animal studies and the disciplines concerned about animal ethics and welfare. A few examples of animal agency are actions easily recognisable and relatable to human beings, such as caring for the dead, helping others in need, parental concern, mourning the dead, the disposition for play, and the ability to choose, among others (McFarland and Hediger 2009; Waal 2017; Bekoff 2008). These are some of the recognizable examples of animal agency which are cited in academic discourse and frequently used in fictional representation. They are regularly suggested as the common threads that link humans and animals.

The concepts of captivity and agency are deeply intertwined because the latter becomes profoundly affected by the former. Since agency is essentially relational, when one thing such as the state of freedom is compromised, the actors involved will obviously notice the changes. However, while there is no doubt as to the negative impact of captivity and incarceration on human beings, the parallel is more complex when discussing the subject of animals. Recent studies prove that non-human animals are negatively impacted by the state of captivity, confinement, and agency restraint (Fischer et al. 2018; Rees 2015; Snyder et al. 1996). Although some of their most basic needs might be fulfilled by human action when in captivity, many others are left unmet.

The subject has been widely explored by ethologists and zoologists. Nonetheless, the question is also part of philosophical discussions, such as the one steered by Nicolas Delon. The author argues that the ability to recognize freedom is something as valuable to human animals as it is to non-human animals:

Seeing other animals as capable of valuing freedom besides avoiding pain and seeking pleasure gives rise to new concerns, a multifaceted conception of animal well-being that involves more complex and varied forms of needs, desires, frustrations, cares and enjoyment than a thin assessment of welfare in terms of restricted preference testing, physiological indicators and basic biological health and integrity. Keeping animals in captivity raises issues that bear directly on their agency. If freedom matters to animals, captivity harms them by restricting agency. By doing so, it also diminishes their capacity for meaning. So, if we think meaning is part of a good life, captivity diminishes an animal's capacity to live a good life (Delon 2018: 134).

In the passage above, Delon attests that both animal and human agencies are altered if the situation which regulates their freedom or captivity changes. These are just some of the issues on animal behaviour caused by captivity and confinement, but many others are studied by specialist scholars. The awareness of such problems as well as the will to study animal behaviour more closely have led to the development of major areas of study. One of which is behavioural ecology: a research field dedicated to examining animal behaviour between individuals or larger groups, whether they are free or captive. Behavioural enrichment, for instance, is another important achievement of current research on animal behaviour in captive enclosures; the field is focused on studying possibilities for enhancing the environment where captive animals live with resources that could make the lives of animals less deficient.

The discussion of such topics has become more pressing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In addition, the thriving discussion around the Anthropocene and the impact of human action on Earth has further enhanced the debate. So much so,

that it has escaped the domains of the strictly scientific discourse and reached the sphere of literary fiction and imagination. The phenomena of zoopoetics (Driscoll and Hoffmann 2018) and environmental literature, for instance, are examples of how fiction has become organized and essentially more concerned about the lives of non-human animals and the environment.

5. Literary Zoos

The representation of zoos in literature became quite common in the mid-nineteenth century with the popularisation of public zoological gardens. The many faces of the literary zoo have navigated different traditions and genres: from European to Latin American traditions, from icons of modernist fiction to children's literature.

The usage of the zoo/aquarium metaphors in literature serves manifold purposes: whether to analyse human spectatorship, the nuances of interspecific contact or practise them as metaphors of social and cultural confinement. Various literary texts belonging to different traditions have proposed an investigation of the relationship between humans and animals within these spaces. From the poem "The Panther" (1903) by Rilke, in which the lyrical self observes a caged panther at the zoo and is moved by her state of captivity, to Julio Cortázar's investigation of colonialism in the Americas through the meaningful encounter with an axolotl at the Paris Jardin de Plantes in "Axolotl" (1956), the allegorical use of the zoo to represent totalitarian regimes in Sławomir Mrożek's *The Elephant* (1957) or even the study of metaphysical and spiritual issues in Yann Martel's *The Life of Pi* (2012), the examples abound. These texts demonstrate that literature is often preoccupied with animal life and is notoriously interested in the representation of zoological gardens in fiction as a wide-reaching phenomenon.

Besides being places which were often associated with amusement, zoos and aquariums were and still are popular because of a simple fact: they promote encounters between humans and animals. Human-animal contact has gradually become scarcer with the passage of time and the advent of modernity. Unless one works directly with animals, the only animals an ordinary person living in the city will regularly spend time with are pet species, such as cats and dogs. Eventually one will meet farm animals on special occasions, for instance as a trip to a farm hotel or a visit to a friend's ranch. However, certain species can only be seen in detail in nature documentaries, or if you go to the zoo or even to a safari experience.

Consequently, even though zoological gardens do not provide a real understanding of what the natural world is, they are still today one of the modes to promote feasible encounters between humans and certain species of animals. It is precisely because of

that the “literary zoo” turned out to be a trend for a while in literature traditions across the globe. After all, zoos and fiction share similar characteristics: they are intimately related to the act of observation. This is also one of the reasons why Foucault sees a parallel between Bentham’s panopticon and the Versailles menagerie. The architecture of zoos and the panopticon is built to favour privileged observation and conceal the observers. This kind of animal display “seek[s] to enable people, *en masse* rather than individuals, to see rather than to be seen and to know rather than to be known” (Braverman 2011: 27):

John Berger synthesises the idea of the zoo as a place for observation in his famous essay “Why Look at Animals?” (1980). Berger compares the experience of going to the zoo to that of visiting a museum or an art gallery.

Visitors visit the zoo to look at animals. They proceed from cage to cage, not unlike visitors in an art gallery who stop in front of one painting, and then move on to the next or the one after next. Yet in the zoo the view is always wrong. Like an image out of focus (Berger 1980: 21-22).

Different from the museum experience in which visitors observe inanimate objects, the zoo experience is about observing living beings leading their normal lives. However, contrary to our expectations, animals are not programmed to behave in a certain way as it is customary in a spectacle, as John Berger explains:

The animals seldom live up to the adults’ memories, whilst to the children they appear, for the most part, unexpectedly lethargic and dull. (As frequent as the calls of animals in a zoo, are the cries of children demanding: Where is he? Why doesn’t he move? Is he dead?) And so one might summarise the felt, but not necessarily expressed the question of most visitors as: Why are these animals less than I believed? (Berger 1980: 21).

In the passage above, Berger demonstrates that going to the zoo is a complex, multifaceted experience which consists of several layers of understanding. Therefore, the usage of the zoo metaphor is connected to all these details which together create the zoo experience. That is precisely the reason why using this kind of literary representation requires a mutual understanding from all parties involved: the author, the narrative, and the reader. The fictional pact in these kinds of narratives relies on the fact that the reader will be able to agree with what is being proposed in the narrative and relate to the experience.

Genetic criticism reveals that many authors who have employed zoo metaphors in their work often refer to their zoo outings in their personal records. In her correspondence, Virginia Woolf, for instance, compares some of the group gatherings of her famous Bloomsbury circle to the social dynamics of the lion’s house in Regent’s Park Zoo:

“One goes from cage to cage. All the animals are dangerous, rather suspicious of each other, and full of fascination and mystery” (Woolf et al. 1977: 451).⁴ The recurrence of zoo mentioned in Woolf’s letters suggests that she was a regular visitor of the London Zoo. A scene also comparing animal to human behaviour appears a few years later in her novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

Similar examples are spotted in Clarice Lispector’s correspondence. In “A explicação que não explica” (1969), a chronicle documenting the writing process of “*O búfalo*”, Lispector mentions that she conceived the story after one of her “thousand visits” to zoological gardens (Lispector 1969) had moved with her husband to Bern – commemorates the existence of a zoo in the city: “There is a zoological garden here and if there is one thing I enjoy doing, it is to watch animals” (Lispector 2018: 225, my translation).

João Guimarães Rosa would also frequently go to zoos. He visited the local zoos in most cities he stayed in during his trips as a diplomat during the 1940s-60s. His diary entries demonstrate that this was a personal habit and that he used these visits to better observe animal behaviour and anatomy, taking careful notes during the time spent there. These observations appear in his multiple literary works depicting animal life but, most directly, in his *Zoo Series* which integrates the posthumous publication *Ave, Palavra* (1970). I have fully examined his notebooks in his archive held by the Instituto de Estudos Brasileiros (IEB)⁵ and could attest that some of the information noted in his records is the early basis for his fictional work in the short zoo-related essays.

The same logic holds regarding aquariums. Jules Verne, for example, visited the Paris aquarium on many occasions and these visits had a deep impact on his literary work. Critics correlate the inauguration of the underground aquarium constructed for the 1867 Paris Universal Exhibition and its influence on one of the writer’s most famous works *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* (1870):

[...] Jules Verne’s 1870 novel *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* bears traces of the aquarium’s visual and spatial legacy in descriptions of limpid sights glimpsed from within the confines of the Nautilus submarine. Such mid- to late-nineteenth-century authors established a cultural imaginary of the underwater in literary representations of the sea’s unreachable depths, depictions whose immersive quality continues to reverberate in today’s sea-life attractions. Yet it is at the 1867 Exposition where the experience of visiting an aquarium becomes at once, and paradoxically, more intensely obscure and more visually powerful,

4 Letter 1160 to Barbara Bagenal about a visit to Saxon Sydney-Turner, 23 December 1920.

5 I consulted the João Guimarães Rosa archive at IEB in September and October 2022.

a spectacle predicated on destabilizing perception and generating excitement through unpredictable encounters with marine life (Haklin 2020: 180).

Jules Verne's case is also representative of a reverse phenomenon. The success of his *Vingt mille lieues sous les mers* influenced the architecture of the Paris Aquarium at Trocadéro. The aquarium is built underground, and its floorplan invites visitors to descend "twenty thousand leagues under the sea" to observe maritime life. This same effect was seen both at the Jardin d'Acclimatation aquarium – which precedes the one built for the Exhibition – and later at the *L'Exposition universelle* in 1867 (Haklin 2020: 181-182)

These examples demonstrate that zoos, aquariums, and literature have developed a close connection. But also, it proves that going to the zoo is a commonplace experience which is widely relatable and, therefore, largely understood.

6. A Case Study: Clarice Lispector's "*O búfalo*"

In the short story "*O búfalo*" (1960), the author creates a narrative about a female character who goes to the zoo after a breakup. The narrative reveals that the woman is filled with anger and heartbreak and these angry feelings are the reason she goes to the zoo. The woman wants to project her anger to the outside and see it mirrored in the animals' behaviour. The text is written in free indirect speech and often oscillates between the third and first person; for this reason, the character often takes the lead in the narration, and the reader has privileged access to her thoughts and feelings.

The narrative begins *in medias res*: it is springtime, and the woman stops in front of the lion and lioness' paddock and observes the animals caressing each other after mating. The scene infuriates her because it is contrary to what she hoped to find on those grounds:

But it was spring. Even the lion licked the smooth head of the lioness. Two golden animals. The woman looked away from the cage, where only the warm scent reminded her of the carnage she had come in search of in the zoological gardens. Then the lion passed, heavy-maned and tranquil, and the lioness, her head on the outstretched paws, slowly became a sphinx once more. "But this

is love, this is love again,” the woman said in rebellion, trying to find her own hatred, but it was spring, and the two lions were in love (Lispector 1972: 147).⁶

In the passage above, the character demonstrates a common feeling shared by zoo visitors: annoyance regarding what she does not see. Naturally, the animals rarely meet visitors’ expectations created around them (Berger 1980) and often frustrate spectators like the woman character in Lispector’s story. Therefore, the author knowingly uses this common feeling of frustration to add to the psychological profile of her character. This scene, therefore, becomes the premise of the character’s zoo visitation experience.

As the narrative progresses, the reader is not offered further background information on who the woman is and what happened to her. The scenes depicted in the story are set in the present time and seldom offer a glimpse into the past or future; the focus is placed on the moment of the human-animal encounter. Fragmentary information about the character is provided throughout the story, but it is not enough to give the reader a precise psychological profile of the woman or the animals.

Despite the lack of information, the text reveals how the character feels concerning the zoo environment. Interestingly, the narrative starts with the woman stopping in front of the lion’s enclosure, which is not the usual order for a visit to the zoo. According to Aaron Santesso, zoos conduct public expectations by creating a “climactic experience” which consists of creating a visitation path in which “charismatic animals familiar from animal-adventure stories were saved for last” (Santesso 2014: 454). The fact the woman’s first stop is in front of the lion’s cage suggests that what we follow in the text is not the beginning of her visiting path, but rather when the narration begins.

The reason the narrative’s account of the visit starts backwards is not mentioned directly, but for narratological purposes, it happens this way possibly because lions are most likely to fulfil the woman’s initial expectations.

However, surprisingly, what she sees is quite the opposite: the lion and the lioness are cuddling and caressing each other. Disappointed with what she sees, the woman leaves the enclosure and observes her surroundings. After this first stop, she acknowledges her sentiment of feeling caged like the animals – “she looked around to find herself surrounded by cages and caged by locked keys” (Lispector 1972: 147).⁷ Thus, her

6 Although I will quote the translated short story in the body of the text for didactic reasons, my analysis exclusively refers to the original text in Portuguese: “*Mas era primavera. Até o leão lambeu a testa glabra da leoa. Os dois animais louros. A mulher desviou os olhos da jaula, onde só o cheiro quente lembrava a carnificina que ela viera buscar no Jardim Zoológico. Depois o leão passeou enjubado e tranquilo, e a leoa lentamente reconstituiu sobre as patas estendidas a cabeça de uma esfinge. ‘Mas isso é amor, é amor de novo’, revoltou-se a mulher tentando encontrar-se com o próprio ódio mas era primavera e dois leões se tinham amado.*”

7 “*rodeada pelas jaulas, enjaulada pelas jaulas fechadas*”.

spirits coincide with the exterior environment: the image of confinement and captivity of the zoo.

The character then walks around the zoo and visits other animal enclosures as frustration continues to lead her experience. Animals, such as the giraffe, seem too naïve for her goals, after all, she decided to visit the zoo to, as she describes it, fall ill – “she who had gone to the zoological gardens in order to be sick”⁸ – and to “to learn from them how to hate” (Lispector 1972: 148).⁹ So, she continues her visit.

In her opinion, the hippo seems too plump and innocently unaware of her presence; the monkeys seemed too joyful in their play and their happiness is useless to her. She gets annoyed by the animals’ nudity at the same time she realizes that, even though primates have remarkably similar bodily characteristics to human beings, they can be nude while observed by other living beings.

This sole thought makes her want to kill the animals in their nudity: “She would have destroyed them with fifteen sharp bullets: the woman’s teeth clenched until her jawbone hurt. The nakedness of those monkeys” (Lispector 1972: 148).¹⁰ However, after describing how she felt towards the apes, the narrative portrays the exchange of a prolonged look between an old monkey and the woman. She notices that the elderly animal’s eyes are showing signs of cataracts, “the ape’s eyes had a white gelatinous veil covering the pupils [...]” (Lispector 1972: 148).¹¹ She looks instantly away because noticing vulnerability in an aged ape elicitely for the animal and this is also not what she wanted to feel during her visit: “‘Oh no, not this’, she thought as she escaped, she pleaded, ‘God, teach me only to hate’” (Lispector 1972: 149).¹² As Alexandre Nodari states, the woman consistently avoids the look of the other to prevent the “radical transformation” the human-animal encounter might propitiate (Nodari 2021: 45). The animal gaze elicits emotionally charged responses which are far from what she seeks.

Besides, the episode with the monkey produces instant memories which are notably related to her relationship status. While observing the apes, she declares her hatred for an unidentified and absent man: “‘I hate you’, she said to a man whose only crime was not to love her. ‘I hate you’, she gasped in haste” (Lispector 1972: 149).¹³ This passage adds a personal dimension to the character and determines that she is

8 “*ela que fora ao Jardim Zoológico para adoecer*”.

9 “*para aprender com eles a odiar*”.

10 “*Ela os mataria com quinze secas balas: os dentes da mulher se apertaram até o maxilar doer. A nudez dos macacos. O mundo que não via perigo em ser nu. Ela mataria a nudez dos macacos.*”

11 “*os olhos do macaco tinham um véu branco gelatinoso*”.

12 “*‘Oh não, não isso’, pensou. E enquanto fugia, disse: ‘Deus, me ensine somente a odiar’.*”

13 “*‘Eu te odeio’, disse ela para um homem cujo crime único era o de não amá-la. ‘Eu te odeio’, disse muito apressada.*”

mourning a failed relationship. Her emotional distress, as the text demonstrates, is the main reason the woman decides to go to the zoo expecting to witness savagery and carnage. Her expectations concerning zoo animals' behaviour seem to mirror the hatred she nurtures for the anonymous man. She does not want to empathize with the suffering of others, since she knows that would be the first stage of forgetting about her sorrow. Her objective in coming to the zoo was to seek endorsement for her feelings of hatred and, to achieve that, she repeats to herself the phrase "I hate you" as a mantra to attenuate and repel any signs of empathy and identification. The character even prays that God would teach her to hate so that she can find a way to overcome the heartbreak.

The woman continues her investigation as she proceeds randomly through other animals' enclosures. She visits several animal paddocks looking for the violence and hatred she deeply seeks, but all she can find is quite the opposite. The scenes she does find are demonstrations of love, passivity, endearment, care, pain, and suffering. The constant state of passiveness of the elephant or the camel, for instance, also does not match what she had expected. Thus, her level of anxiety and frustration builds up as she walks around the zoo:

But where, where would she find the animal that might teach her to keep her own hatred? That hatred which belonged to her by right but which she could not attain in grief? Where would she learn to hate so as not to die of love? And with whom? The world of spring, the world of the beasts that in the spring grew spiritual, with paws which scratch but do not wound... (Lispector 1972: 152).¹⁴

The daylight is gradually disappearing when she meets a buffalo, the animal with whom she establishes a meaningful connection. So, after an afternoon wandering about the zoo, the character stops in front of the buffalo's enclosure and observes him closely.

She watches the buffalo from afar while looking for the signs of what she expected to find: the blackness of his body contrasts with the whiteness of his horns. As their eyes meet, once more she feels distressed by maintaining eye contact with an animal, so she avoids the look and faces a tree. However, tempted by what could come from this encounter, she tries calling the buffalo's attention by screaming at him: "The buffalo now appeared to be larger. The black buffalo once more. 'Ah!', she exclaimed suddenly

¹⁴ "Mas onde, onde encontrar o animal que lhe ensinasse a ter o seu próprio ódio? o ódio que lhe pertencia por direito mas que em dor ela não alcançava? Onde aprender a odiar para não morrer de amor? E com quem? O mundo de primavera, o mundo das bestas que na primavera se cristianizam em patas que arranham mas não dói..."

in pain. The buffalo with its back to her, motionless. The woman's pallid face did not know how to summon him. 'Ah!', she exclaimed provoking him" (Lispector 1972: 155).¹⁵

But the buffalo had turned his back to the woman and her cries did not make him move. So, in a desperate attempt to drive his attention back to her, she throws a stone at the animal. The pebble lands in the enclosure but does not reach the animal. He, therefore, remains motionless. The woman's action is analogous to her experiencing unrequited love for the man she hates. Her desperate acts embody the anger and frustration she had been building up until this point. She then continues screaming while holding the cage bars as she feels her bodily functions changing: "'Ah!' she cried, shaking the bars. That white thing spread itself inside her, viscous like saliva. The buffalo remained with his back to her" (Lispector 1972: 155).¹⁶

Although her despair does not have a direct impact on the animal, who continues to act as if unaware of her presence, it triggers a succession of physical reactions. The closer she gets to the buffalo, the more intertwined the animal is with a representation of a male figure. While the narrative initially treats the buffalo as the actual animal in the zoo enclosure, it also attributes a metaphorical sexual meaning to the scene. The scene suggests a sexual analogy as the woman notices something white and sticky "like saliva" spreading inside her. But, suddenly, this climax-like scenario turns into pain, as she feels the white liquid turning into thick and darkened blood:

'Ah!' she cried. But this time there flowed inside her at last the first trickle of black blood. The initial moment was one of pain. As if the world had shrivelled up so that this blood might flow. She stood there, hearing that first bitter oil drip as in a grotto, the shunned female. Her strength was still imprisoned between the bars, but something incomprehensible and warm was happening, something that tasted in the mouth like happiness (Lispector 1972: 155-156).¹⁷

The whole act explores sexual imagery. The white sticky liquid she feels flowing inside her is a distinct reference to semen, while the darkened blood which follows evokes the idea of menstruation and fertility. In sum, the scene revolves around the symbolism of sexual intercourse, as well as fecundity.

The woman feels pain, and in this moment, her eyes finally meet the buffalo's as she lets herself be enraptured by a reciprocal connection that she labels as "mutual

15 "O búfalo agora maior. O búfalo negro. Ah, disse de repente com uma dor. O búfalo de costas para ela, imóvel. O rosto esbranquiçado da mulher não sabia como chamá-lo. Ah! disse provocando-o."

16 "Ah! disse sacudindo as barras. Aquela coisa branca se espalhava dentro dela, viscosa como uma saliva. O búfalo de costas."

17 "Ficou parada, ouvindo pingar como numa grotta aquele primeiro óleo amargo, a fêmea desprezada. Sua força ainda estava presa entre barras, mas uma coisa incompreensível e quente, enfim incompreensível, acontecia, uma coisa como uma alegria sentida na boca."

assassination” (Lispector 1972: 156). She slowly comes into a trance, moving her head like the buffalo, imitating his behaviour and his pace; finally, she feels the hatred she was looking for emanating from the animal’s eyes. This scene translates what Nodari similarly identifies as a perspectivist standpoint, “in which everything there exists [...] does not only possess vision, agency, subjectivity, point of view, but also a world and nature of its own” (Nodari 2021: 46).¹⁸ Therefore, when the woman exchanges a look with the animal, she is introduced to his world, to his anger, behaviour, and pain.

The short story concludes with an ambiguous ending. The woman falls on the ground while looking at the buffalo. The text implies she harmed herself with a dagger and she falls hurt leaning over the enclosure bars: “Caught as if her hand had fastened forever to the dagger that she herself had thrust. Caught, as she slipped spellbound along the railings – overcome by such giddiness that, before her body toppled gently to the ground, the woman saw the entire sky and a buffalo” (Lispector 1972: 156).¹⁹

The ambiguity of this short story lies in whether the woman’s self-injury is read literally or metaphorically. Whether she finds actual ways to feel pain at the zoo, or she experiences a *petite mort*, a death-like sensation of relaxation after an orgasm, both are done while attempting to establish a bond with animals rather than humans. In addition, this scene re-enacts an association between suffering and sexual relationships which is connected to the reasons the main character has for visiting the zoo.

The fact Lispector creates this scene in which captive animals function as the woman’s interlocutor in such symbolic representation is truly relevant to the interpretation of the story. The animals listed in the narrative are not just animals living in the wild, but animals who are confined in a zoo and are deprived of their freedom and agency. Therefore, it becomes apparent that captivity is one of the main aspects connecting the main character in “*O búfalo*” and the animals she observes.

At the same time, the character feels trapped in her world: her experience of suffering, her gender, and the historical context she lives in are analogous to the imagery of captivity which afflicts the animals she observes. In the same way, she is enraged by the condition of being a woman experiencing unrequited love. Besides, one could argue that the inconformity usually attributed to women in Lispector’s stories is due to the social limitation women frequently experience. So, as the woman’s anger builds up, she expects to find similar feelings coming from the locked-up animals at the zoo. Hence, the passiveness of the animals is incongruent with the amount of suffering and

18 “em que tudo que existe [...] não é só dotado de visão, agência, subjetividade, ponto de vista, como também, atrelado a isso, um mundo ou natureza próprios.”

19 “Presa como se sua mão se tivesse grudado para sempre ao punhal que ela mesma cravara. Presa, enquanto escorregava enfeitiçada ao longo das grades. Em tão lenta vertigem que antes do corpo baquear macio a mulher viu o céu inteiro e um búfalo.”

abuse to which they are subjected. As discussed previously, most animals are not fit for captivity and living in confinement. Their agency is compromised, since all their functions need to be facilitated by human action. In parallel, women in Brazil during the 1950s and 1960s would also have most of their actions mediated by male interference.

Symbolically, while the buffalo being one large mammal with no natural predator could be interpreted as an icon of masculinity and strength, its blackness and African/American origins could refer to the transatlantic slave trade, imperialism, and the oppression of others. For the Plains Indigenous peoples, buffalos are “the very source of life [...]”. From that animal, Plains people once derived not only meat for sustenance, but skins for tipis, fur for robes, and virtually all materials for the tools and objects necessary for everyday living” (Lawrence 1993: 21-22).²⁰ Also, the buffalo in the story is not free but rather captive in enclosures secured by bars which were created by Western white people. In this sense, the story also holds a symbolism to race dispute and inequality. Moreover, the fact that the narrative happens in a zoo corroborates the power dynamics which is suggested. Besides being institutions which create entertainment around the display of captive animals, they are embedded with colonial and racist history. Therefore, the whole scenery depicted by the author establishes a dialogue surrounded by multiple layers of understanding that entail the actors and the environment of the narrative.

7. Confinement and Captivity in Clarice Lispector's Work

The image of confinement and captivity is recurrent in Lispector's work and is frequently used to represent the power dynamics which often frames the relationships between men/women and humans/animals. Besides this subject being explored in-depth in “*O búfalo*”, it is also present in works such as the novella *A paixão segundo G.H.* (*The Passion According to G.H.*, 1964), and the short stories “*A quinta história*” (“The Fifth Story”, 1971) and “*A língua do 'p'*” (“The ‘P’ Language”, 1974). As a means to establish a connection between women and animals of different kinds, Lispector explores the topic of captivity, agency restriction or social restraint as the main theme in the narratives previously mentioned.

In *A paixão segundo G.H.*, a wealthy woman who is going through a romantic break-up has an epiphany after an unconventional experience with a cockroach. The character is particularly drawn to the maid's room for she wants to get rid of all the traces of her former maid who had recently quit. The text mentions that the maid was a Black woman, and this information is vital for a better understanding of the novella. It further

²⁰ Some of the peoples who inhabit the area of the American Plains are Arapaho, Cheyenne, Comanche, Crow, Lakota, and Shoshone, among others (Lawrence 1993).

analyses this subject since it creates an association between the Black maid, her room, and the insect. The fact that the whole narrative is set in the maid's room is significant since this space stands for a material memory of slavery in Brazil.

While cleaning the maid's room, the character finds a living cockroach in one of the corners of the small room. The encounter with the cockroach leads the woman into intense meditation and reflection upon her own life. The prolonged consideration of her failures and achievements triggers a momentous psychological epiphany. In her cockroach-contemplation, the character metaphorically addresses important questions concerning race, gender, and colonialism. As in most of Lispector's works, the text is experimental both in form and content.

Another example is the short story "*A quinta história*", in which the narrator retells the same story several times, but adding a different outcome each time. The main plot portrays a housewife who finds several cockroaches on her kitchen floor. To get rid of the insects, she produces a home-remedy mixture to eradicate the cockroaches. This mixture is made of sugar, water, and plaster and, when the insects feed on it, they desiccate internally and die. In the narratives, the character-narrator is conflicted about the need to kill the insects and often feels guilty about it. Therefore, in each of the stories the narrator creates, the woman has a different resolution towards the cockroaches and a realization concerning her life.

"*A língua do 'p'*", on the other hand, develops a narrative outside of the domestic domain. In this text, the main character, Maria Aparecida, is an English teacher who is travelling from the countryside to the capital Rio de Janeiro by train to catch a plane to New York. She is young and has a promising future. Maria Aparecida is travelling alone in an empty train wagon with two unknown men. Judging by their behaviour and conversation, the character thinks they might be plotting to rape and kill her. The men use "'p' language", a common language game where you repeat every syllable of the word using a "p", to talk between themselves and disguise their intentions. Because she fears the harassment, the character pretends she is a prostitute by lowering her cleavage and acting in an alluring way. That way, she thinks, they might give up doing what they had planned. However, her plot fails, and she ends up in prison. In jail, the woman is insulted by the police officers and is locked up in a cell for three nights; her only companions are cigarettes and a "fat cockroach" which crawls on the cement floor where she throws her cigarette butts. The character feels demeaned by the whole situation but secretly admits to herself that she indeed wanted that something had happened, and she had a sexual encounter with those men. The succession of events implies that the scenes overlap, and the woman would deserve all the insults she received and be worth as much as a cockroach crawling the dirty floor of a jail cell.

The short stories “*O búfalo*”, “*A quinta história*”, “*A língua do ‘p’*” and the novella *A paixão segundo G.H* display similar characteristics: 1) all stories depict a one-to-one meeting between women and animals; 2) the women are alone in spaces which symbolize confinement: a kitchen, a maid’s room, and a prison cell; 3) the text individualizes the animal in question; 4) the women suffer from broken or problematic relationships with men; 5) all the main characters seem to experience a transcendent psychological experience after meeting the animals.

In all four examples, the physical space where the narratives unfold plays a significant part in the story. Although the female characters come from diverse backgrounds – from wealthy to poor – as well as from varied social strata, they present some similarities. Essentially, they are portrayed in places which can be associated with confinement, lack of freedom and constrained agency: the house, the maid’s room, the kitchen, and the prison cell. All these spaces can be understood as symbols of social and agency restraint.

The house is a place usually associated with women who, historically, have been circumscribed to its domains: “The woman was seen as the embodiment of the home, and in turn the home was seen as an extension of her – an extension of both her corporeal and spiritual self” (Gordon 1996: 282). More than that, women and the house have been intertwined in Western culture, almost as if one acted as a synonym for the other:

Between the middle of the nineteenth and middle of the twentieth centuries [...] the connection between women and their houses in Western middle-class culture was so strong that it helped shaped the perception of both. In this period, it seemed that a simile – women and interiors were like one another – was transformed into a synonym (Gordon 1996: 282).

For this reason, women have been frequently represented in different artistic expressions, such as paintings and literature, as being an inherent part of the house domain. So much so, that women were often represented as part of the background of a particular scenery (Gordon 1996: 282-283). Analogously, this type of background representation was long associated with landscapes and animals, as to emphasize the predominance of human beings (Süssekind 1990; Thomas 1983; Torquato 2020).

In Brazil in the 1950s and 1960s, hence when Lispector wrote the narratives in question, the situation was not much different. The house was a space ruled by pre-determined roles and pre-established expectations; a place in where women should perform certain expected duties. Women’s rights were restricted at the time. For instance, until the early 1960s, married women did not have the right to legally own real estate. Also, the law concerning the punishment of domestic violence against women was male-

oriented: “It was noted that in Brazil in the 1980s, for instance, that men who murdered their wives or partners whom they believed to have committed adultery were routinely acquitted” (Macaulay 2014: 82). These and other examples illustrate how women were socially perceived at the time and add to the interpretation of Lispector’s stories.

The kitchen, one of the spaces which inhabit Clarice Lispector’s fictional universe, has undoubtedly been recognized as a place mostly inhabited by women. Therefore, the experience reported in “*A quinta história*” reflects the semantics popularly associated with servitude, social rank, and gender roles.

Likewise, the maid’s room which is where *A paixão segundo G.H.* is set serves similar purposes. A maid’s room is part of a house meant to accommodate live-in servants. These rooms usually lack windows and are the smallest in the house, often resembling a prison cell. The typical upper-class house/apartment frequently contains two independent entrances, one which leads to the living room and another leading to the kitchen or laundry area. The maid’s room is strategically placed near the backdoor entrance, commonly used as the “servants’ entry”. This separation has the clear motive to determine which part of the house should be inhabited by whom. It promotes both the invisibility of the servants as well as prevents them from having contact with the other rooms in the house.

Besides being a place which is built to segregate, the maid’s room is arguably a memory of the slavery system in Brazil. In the first half of the twentieth century, the maid’s room has been incorporated into the standard floorplan of Brazilian upper-class homes as a tacit requirement of higher social ranks. The layout of an average house or apartment in Brazil usually is divided into three main parts as identified by Roberto Reis: the social area, the intimate area, and the service area. As the author points out, this was a common way “to bring the social hierarchy existing on farms and sugar mills from the slave era to middle-class housing and, more specifically, to the apartment” (Reis 1994: 100).²¹

Historically, a maid’s position was commonly occupied by women who could have been free or even enslaved, depending on the historical time and situation. Therefore, the connections which are drawn in the texts by Lispector refer to the remains of a tradition which persists today. The fact that Janair, the maid in *A paixão segundo G.H.*, is a Black woman contributes to the construction of the metaphor of inequality and discrimination which is elicited in the story.

The other restricted venue in these stories, the prison cell, which appears in “*A língua do ‘p’*”, is unquestionably linked with confinement and restriction of agency. There

21 “[...] trazer a hierarquia social existente nas fazendas e engenhos da época da escravidão para a habitação de classe média e, mais especificamente, para o apartamento.”

is no doubt as to why prisons embody the definition of impairment of freedom and confinement.

Clarice Lispector uses the zoo, the house, the kitchen, the maid's room, and the prison cell as synonyms of confinement and epitomes of the power dynamics which guide the social relationships she critically addresses in her stories. The animal encounters presented add relevant layers of comprehension to the stories and the psychological construction of the characters. In these stories, animals occupy pivotal positions and can influence the course of the events. While in "*O búfalo*", large captive mammals conduct the narrative and are able to influence human comebacks, in *A paixão segundo G.H.* and the two short stories, the cockroach incorporates additional knowledge to Lispector's take on human-animal conviviality.

Like the buffalo, the cockroach similarly plays a noteworthy role in Lispector's fiction. The symbolism of agency constraint, incarceration, and social humiliation is amalgamated in the cockroach. In this sense, whereas the woman-buffalo relationship re-enacts a female/male link, the woman-cockroach union highlights the indifference with which women are seen in patriarchal societies.

The cockroach is one of the most famous literary insects. Besides the well-known example of Kafka's *Ungeziefer* (very likely a cockroach), cockroaches have been widely present in the history of literature, as Marion Copeland notes in her book *Cockroach* (2003). The three texts written by Clarice Lispector which portray cockroach interactions present enough material to confirm Copeland's affirmation concerning these insects and their symbolic relevance to literary illustration, most specifically in stories starred or written by women.

In her book, Marion Copeland argues that cockroaches are used in literature as an ecofeminist symbol. The reason behind the extensive link between literature and cockroaches is, according to the author, that:

Because humans and cockroaches seem in many ways not dissimilar life forms in such works, we find that, at least since Classical Greece, authors have brought cockroach characters into the foreground to speak not only for themselves but symbolically for all the weak and downtrodden, the outsiders, those forced to survive on the underside and on the margins of dominant human cultures (Copeland 2003: 11).

Copeland affirms that the connection between cockroaches and literary representation is established because they serve as a metaphor for subalternity, silence, and vulnerability. The insect's preference for darker places and the instinct to swarm elucidate imagery-based metaphors connected to poverty, anonymity, or minority

groups. The characteristics presented in all three of Clarice Lispector's cockroach narratives match Copeland's analysis.

In *A paixão segundo G.H.*, for instance, the narrator comes to the extent of creating links between the cockroach she finds in the maid's room and Janair, the former maid and a Black woman. The text describes her insignificance to the narrator and the lady of the house, who could barely remember the maid's name after her departure. While revisiting the memory of Janair, the narrator creates imagery which is surrounded by dark colours, such as her skin:

[...] under her little apron, she was always dressed in dark brown or black, which made her all dark and invisible [...]. Janair had what was almost only an external form, the features within her form were so refined they barely existed: she was flattened out like a bas-relief frozen on a piece of wood (Lispector 1988: 33).²²

In this passage, Janair's attire in combination with her dark skin colour is described in parallel to the cockroach. The comparison takes place over the suggestion that the Black woman and the cockroach share similar characteristics. Janair's low social rank and racialized description easily blend in with the background and reduces her existence to invisibility. The cockroaches lurk in darkness and their bodies have flattened format which is perfect for not being seen. Analogously, the Black woman is described as the insect whose existence is insignificant to the main character and society at large.

Similar imagery is presented in "*A língua do 'p'*", for the cockroach introduces symbolism of subjugation and disgust to the story. In the final scene, Maria Aparecida is arrested as a prostitute on the train. She is unable to explain to the police what happened because they would probably not believe her story. When she is taken by the police, a young woman who is going to board the same train looks at her with contempt. She is taken to prison and treated as rubbish by the police officers. In the prison cell, her only companions are multiple cigarettes and a fat cockroach lurking on the floor. The inferiority and helplessness of the character are reinforced by the cockroach symbolism. Even though the character is an educated woman who is preparing for an exchange programme abroad, she is treated with disbelief and suspicion. Once more in Lispector's narratives, the allegory of confinement alongside the cockroach symbolism recuperates the imagery of invisibility and unimportance which is attributed to the women.

22 "[...] sob o pequeno avental, vestia-se sempre de marrom escuro ou de preto, o que a tornava toda escura e invisível [...]. Janair tinha quase que apenas a forma exterior, os traços que ficavam dentro de sua forma eram tão apurados que mal existiam: ela era achatada como um baixo-relevo preso a uma tábua."

The analogy of filth and uncleanness is reproduced in “*A quinta história*” as cockroaches infest a housewife’s kitchen. The character is torn by the idea of having to kill the pests or being seen as an unhygienic housewife.

Besides being portrayed as pests, the cockroaches are described as evil forces that lurk in the darkness and menace the woman’s home: “By day the cockroaches were invisible and no one would believe in the secret curse that gnawed at such a peaceful home” (Lispector 2016: 310, my translation).²³ The cockroach symbolism in this story, not only corroborates the idea of insect and filth which also appears in other stories, but also associates it with the role of women in a patriarchal society. The kitchen stands as a space promoting confinement and invisibility since it is culturally associated with domesticity and subservience. On the other hand, since the kitchen is popularly known as the “territory” of women, therefore, the kitchen is one of the only rooms of the house which is free from male interference. They have the responsibility over this space, therefore, if something goes wrong, they will also suffer the consequences. Therefore, the appearance of cockroaches in the kitchen portends a threat to the sanitation of the entire house.

On the other hand, Marion Copeland also remarks that cockroaches can also be seen as a positive allegory. Authors such as Anne Sexton, Muriel Rukeyser, and to some extent Clarice Lispector, find room to create an alternative use to the common portrayal of cockroaches as something disgusting. According to Copeland, these and other authors see the cockroach as a primordial being which should be valued since it has lived on this planet for millennia, resisting massive extinctions as well as time. “For three hundred and fifty million years, they have reproduced with no change. When the world was practically naked, they walked slowly across it” (Lispector 1988: 40).²⁴ In this sense, cockroaches could also be related to survival, endurance, and longevity. The character-narrator in Lispector’s novel uses this premise throughout the novel to lead the readers through her argumentative thinking.

It is also due to the “primitive” attractiveness of the cockroach that the insect gains such emblematic relevance in the ritual which is being performed in the story. The situation seems to be a rather spiritual ceremony to achieve a more-than-human knowledge, often in dialogue with biblical texts. In a quotation which alludes to Leviticus, the narrator introduces the first idea of eating certain animals as a manner to access the source of good and badness in humanity:

²³ “De dia as baratas eram invisíveis e ninguém acreditaria no mal secreto que roía casa tão tranquila.”

²⁴ “Há trezentos e cinquenta milhões de anos elas se repetiam sem se transformarem. Quando o mundo era quase nu, elas já o cobriam vagarosas.”

‘But you shall not eat of the impure? Which are the eagle, the griffin, and the hawk.’ Nor the owl, nor the swan, nor the bat, nor the stork, nor the entire tribe of crows. I knew that the Bible’s impure animals were forbidden because the impure is the root – for there are things created that have never made themselves beautiful and have stayed just as they were when created, and only they still continue to be the entirely complete root. And because they are the entirely complete root, they are not to be eaten, the fruit of good and of evil – eating of living matter would expel me from a paradise of adornments and lead me to walk forever through the desert with a shepherd’s staff (Lispector 1988: 64).²⁵

In her chapter in *Insect Poetics*, Sarah Gordon affirms that “[e]ntomophagy is a manifestation of the human relation to nature as one of consumption” (Gordon 2006: 348). When analysing some poems by Mary Oliver, Gordon perceives many forms of “human to animal transformations” and associates this aspect of Oliver’s poetry to the wish to distance “herself from humanity” (Gordon 2006: 349).

In *A paixão segundo G.H.*, Clarice Lispector takes a similar path when her main character takes the action of eating the cockroach. The narrative begins with the character constantly reminding the reader of how she has learned to forget her humanity to soon embody the traits and features of the cockroach which she observes exhaustively. From the half of the novel towards the end which climaxes with her eating the insect, the character seems to recognize herself as a cockroach:

The cockroach is pure seduction. Cilia blinking, cilia that beckon. I too, gradually reducing myself to what was irreducible in me, I too had thousands of cilia blinking, and with my cilia I advance, I protozoic, pure protein. Hold my hand tight, I have reached the irreducible with the fatefulness of a death knell – I sense that all this is ancient and immense, I sense in the hieroglyph of the slow cockroach the writing of the Far East. And in this desert of great seductions, the creatures: I and the live cockroach. Life, my love, is one great seduction where everything that exists is seduced. That room that was desert and therefore

25 “‘Mas não comereis das impuras: quais são a águia, e o grifo, e o esmerilhão’. E nem a coruja, e nem o cisne, e nem o morcego, nem a cegonha, e todo o gênero de corvos. Eu estava sabendo que o animal imundo da Bíblia é proibido porque o imundo é a raiz – pois há coisas criadas que nunca se enfeitaram e conservaram-se iguais ao momento em que foram criadas, e somente elas continuaram a ser a raiz ainda toda completa. E porque são a raiz é que não se podia comê-las, o fruto do bem e do mal – comer a matéria viva me expulsaria de um paraíso de adornos, e me levaria para sempre a andar com um cajado pelo deserto.”

primitively alive. I had reached nothingness, and the nothingness was live and moist (Lispector 1988: 52).²⁶

The cockroach and the character seem to be, at this point, in unison. The woman seems to have taken the cockroach's perspective and can experience the world as an insect. This is a very similar situation to what happens in the woman-buffalo relationship.

In addition, the woman-animal experiences in Lispector's stories always lead to a type of allegory of death. The ambiguous ending of "*O búfalo*" leads to death, both figuratively and metaphorically. In *A paixão segundo G.H.*, the narrator acts to kill and then eat the cockroach. In "*A língua do 'p'*" after Maria Aparecida is released from prison, she reads in the newspaper that a woman was raped and murdered on the same train she was on; she even wonders whether the victim was the same woman who looked down on her contemptuously. In "*A quinta história*", all the variations of the story will infallibly end with the cockroaches dying.

It is relevant that in these narratives, the representation of women, animals and death is intertwined by several layers of imagery of confinement and captivity. At the same time these allegories offer unique perspectives on human-animal relationships, they also offer critical interpretations of the role of women in a patriarchal society.

8. Conclusion

In the stories by Clarice Lispector, animal encounters offer various insights into women's psychological and emotional world, at the same time they propose singular interpretations on human-animal relationships in fiction and in life.

These stories represent the essence of the discussion on the understanding of conviviality as a broad concept which tries to grasp the complex relationships between humans, other animal species and the more-than-human. As Tilmann Heil puts it in his book *Comparing Conviviality* (2020), conviviality in today's world standards "refers to the process of living *with a difference* by way of interacting, translating, and negotiating in both conflictual and cooperative social situations", but also, "the engagement with negative potentialities, avoidance, power asymmetries, and inequality [...]" (Heil 2020: 21, emphasis in the original). Lispector stories are imbued with the ambiguities that permeate human-animal conviviality.

²⁶ "A barata é pura sedução. Cílios, cílios pestanejando que chamam. Também eu, que aos poucos estava me reduzindo ao que em mim era irreduzível, também eu tinha milhares de cílios pestanejando, e com meus cílios eu avanço, eu protozoária, proteína pura. Segura minha mão, cheguei no irreduzível com a fatalidade de um dobre – sinto que tudo isso é antigo e amplo, sinto no hieroglifo da barata lenta a grafia do Extremo Oriente. E neste deserto de grandes seduições, as criaturas: eu e a barata viva."

These ideas synthesize the fictional representation of interspecific relations as introduced by Lispector in her works. At the same time these interactions are mediated by overwhelming power dynamics, where human action still stands and is the strongest, there is also room for symbolic and cathartic understandings of such types of unequal bonds. The narratives demonstrate that, at the same time humans incarcerate and subjugate animals (and other people) in zoos or aquariums for the means of entertainment, they can also draw knowledge and meaning to significant levels from these relationships. In this way, her work can be understood as part of modern zoopoetics, which address these ideas in a quite critical way, often considering human beings as part of a whole and not on top of the pyramid of existence.

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