

She Clucked: The Voice of the Mother and the Other in Clarice Lispector's Children's Books

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The unequal relationship between the adult-author and the child-reader adds a unique dimension to children's literature and enhances the authoritarian control over the story. In "Writing the Reader: The Literary Child in and Beyond the Book," Claudia Nelson notes that children's literature, "a term tinged with irony by the elided gap between producer and consumer, is both mimetic and prescriptive. It traces a history of childhood that is simultaneously a history of adult *wishes* about childhood—or...about childhood reading" (223 emphasis in original). In children's literature, the adult writer dictates knowledge to the dependent child. Robert McGillis observes that "children continue to be the subaltern and their literature continues to serve as a colonizing...agent *par excellence*" (McGillis 224 emphasis in original). Clarice Lispector's children's stories fail to correspond with this colonizing model of children's literature. By using techniques that destabilize adult authority—such as metafiction—she brings the relationship between the child-reader and the

There is some truth in the historical fact that whenever man has to be defined as man equals child, the edenic period whereby he can live without structures is short-lived and another game is invented which brings in the law-maker who declares what games are and what they are not.

—Gina Politi

Ah, cacarejou Laura, os humanos são muito complicados por dentro. Eles até se sentem obrigados a mentir, imagine só.

—Clarice Lispector

adult-narrator into balance by permitting the child to interact with the text and determine its meaning on her own.

Although written for young readers, Lispector's children's books maintain the characteristics and themes of her adult works. One similarity is the narrator's role in the story's development. Francisco Aurélio Ribeiro observes in *A literatura infanto-juvenil de Clarice Lispector* that the narrator of *A mulher que matou os peixes* (1968)—a mother named Clarice—forces the child to contemplate "desde o início da narrativa...o questionamento (involuntario?) da maternidade" (74-75).¹ Lispector's book encourages readers to scrutinize not only motherhood, but the adult world in general. In another of Lispector's children's stories, *A vida íntima de Laura* (1974), the interrogation of adults stems from the narrator and her construction of the main character, Laura, a chicken. In *A mulher que matou os peixes* and *A vida íntima de Laura* the narrator's voice and linguistic representations—and silencing—of animals provoke the child reader to question the adult world. Metafictional techniques in these stories blur reality and fiction and incite readers to doubt the sincerity of the unreliable narrators.

¹ The narrator of *A mulher que matou os peixes* shares Clarice's first name. In an attempt to prevent confusion between the narrator "Clarice" and the author "Clarice Lispector," this paper will use "Lispector" in reference to Clarice Lispector the author, and "Clarice" when discussing the narrator of *A mulher que matou os peixes*.

Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as follows:

fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of its own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (2)

In Lispector's children's books, the narrators interact with the readers by asking questions and commenting on the text. For example, the narrator of *A vida íntima de Laura* introduces her character by asking the reader to guess who Laura is. She encourages the reader to think, "Dou-lhe um beijo na testa se você adivinhar... Viu como é difícil? Pois Laura é uma galinha" (9). Lispector's children's books do not hide their purpose of telling a story. Rather, the narrators continuously waver between the "fictional" story and "real" dialogues with readers. In both *A mulher que matou os peixes* and *A vida íntima de Laura*, the narrators introduce their stories, and interrupt them, with personal commentary. In comparison to Lispector's adult novel *A hora da estrela*—whose "dedicatória do autor" is parenthetically subtitled "Na verdade Clarice Lispector" (9)—Lispector does not present herself within these two children's books. No dedication appears where the author separates herself from the narrator of the story.² While there is no explicit interaction between the narrators and the author, the narrators engage the readers in the development of the texts.

The narrators of *A mulher que matou os peixes* and *A vida íntima de Laura* start by announcing that they will share a secret with the reader. The narrator of Laura's story begins:

Vou logo explicar o que quer dizer 'vida íntima'. É assim: vida íntima que dizer que a gente não deve contar a todo o mundo o que se passa na casa da gente. São coisas que não dizem a qualquer pessoa. (9)

By explaining the secretiveness of the intimate story she will tell, the narrator attempts to form a bond with her reader. Other methods of strengthening the reader-narrator relationship include invitations to the reader to write or visit the narrator, asking the readers to guess parts of the story, and the sharing of personal information. In *A mulher que matou os peixes*, the narrator tells the readers her name as she attempts to gain their trust. She also confesses a secret—that she killed her son's fish—and begins by admitting her crime:

Essa mulher que matou os peixes infelizmente sou eu. Mas juro a vocês que foi sem querer. Logo eu! que não tenho coragem de matar uma coisa viva! Até deixo de matar uma barata ou outra. (7)

The interaction between the narrator and the readers encourages the children to be active contributors to the story. Linda Hutcheon explains that "narcissistic narrative" (metafiction) "transforms the authorial process of shaping, of making, into part of the pleasure and challenge of reading as a co-operative, interpretive experience" (154). The language in the book not only presents children with a story, but invites them to participate with their own language and to draw their own conclusions.

THE MOTHER'S VOICE: A MULHER QUE MATOU OS PEIXES

The narrator of *A mulher que matou os peixes* is named Clarice. As the title suggests, she is an adult: *uma mulher*. Throughout the story, the reader learns that she lives with a family, which she sometimes upsets and other times consoles, and is the mother of at least one son. Her position is immediately ambiguous because

2 These stories differ from *O mistério do Coelho Pensante* (1967), which opens with a paragraph that is initialed C.L. In this introduction, Lispector dedicates the story to her sons' rabbits. As in the other children's texts discussed, she describes the secretive nature of the story and states that "esse 'mistério' é mais uma conversa íntima do que uma história" (5). In addition, she introduces the idea of "reading between the lines" when she says, "Como a história foi escrita para exclusivo uso doméstico, deixei *todas as entrelinhas* para as explicações orais" (5 emphasis added).

she shares the unusual first name of the author, Clarice Lispector. Lispector's decision to name the narrator Clarice makes it unclear if the narrator is actually Lispector, a fictional version of Lispector, or a completely fictional character.

The narrator begins with the confession of her crime and promises to explain her case at the end of the story. Admitting that she is not courageous enough to discuss the details of the death of the fish at the beginning of her narrative, she distracts herself by telling anecdotes of the animals "naturais" and "convidados" she has known.

She reflects on cockroaches, flies, lizards, rats, cats, chickens, ducks, rabbits, dogs, monkeys, and finally the "vermelhinhos" fish she killed. All of the animal anecdotes end in misfortune. Insects are crushed, swallowed, or exterminated. Dogs, cats, and monkeys are abandoned or sent away. Vengeful dogs mortally attack each other. Illness, abandonment, murder, natural death, and hunger loom throughout the text.

When addressing the readers, Clarice uses the plural form *vocês*. Her audience is not one child, but many. Her conversations with them often stress a conflict between *us* (the kids) and *them* (the grown-ups). Clarice understands the distance separating her readers from herself and tries to minimize it. Contradictorily, at times she swings back into an adult role, acting as a protector of children. The inconsistency of her role as mother-adult and friend-child provokes questions about the adult world and the text that illuminates (or obfuscates) it for the readers.

Recognizing her ambiguous position, Clarice tries to prove her allegiance to her child readers. In an attempt to validate her story and gain the readers' trust, she sides with the children:

Se eu tivesse culpa, eu confessava a vocês, porque não minto para menino ou menina. Só minto às vezes para certo tipo de gente grande porque é o único jeito. Tem

gente grande que é tão chata! Vocês não acham? Elas nem compreendem a alma de uma criança. Criança nunca é chata. (9)

Clarice sends conflicting messages when she—an adult—confides that adults are boring and do not understand children. The narrator represents both friend and foe, and it remains unclear if either can be trusted. Her disclosure that she is dishonest with adults, rationalizing that "é o único jeito," also challenges the reliability of her narrative. Although she sometimes lies, she wants to convince the reader that she is always truthful to *children* because she respects and understands them. However, an ulterior motive makes her suspect: the story's purpose is to convince readers of her innocence and to be absolved of her crime.

At the beginning of the narrative, readers learn her offense: "os peixes morreram de fome porque esqueci de lhes dar comida" (9). While Clarice does not attempt to conceal this disastrous outcome, she procrastinates revealing the event's details until the penultimate page. She hopes that by telling readers about her past experience with animals, they will conclude that she only could "ter matado os peixinhos sem querer." She explains, "Estou com esperança de que, no fim do livro, vocês já me conheçam melhor e me dêem o perdão que eu peço a propósito da morte dos dois 'vermelhinhos'" (8). While the descriptions of her pets illustrate the narrator's interest in animals, they also reveal her vulnerability, unreliability, and ambiguous role. In the end, readers learn that she starved her son's fish to death. The narrator, who had presented herself as a compassionate friend, slides into the role of an irresponsible mother.

Clarice's unreliability also stems from her placement of apparently real and authentic conversations with readers alongside fictional and inauthentic elements of her narrative. After telling a violent anecdote in which two dogs

die, she transports the readers to a fictional world by describing an enchanted island. She paints a beautiful picture with butterflies, dolphins, seahorses, colorful urchins, and plants that can sing and talk. She then suspends the narrative to ask, “Vocês pensam que estou inventando?” and to swear her honesty: “Mas, se eu jurar por Deus que todo o que contei neste livro é verdade, vocês acreditam?” (51). By asking for verification that readers believe her, she reminds them of the narrative’s possible fictionality. Capable of spinning the tale of a fantastic island, the authenticity of her other stories becomes suspect. The entire narrative may be nothing more than make-believe.

In the enchanted island scene, Clarice dreams about taking the children to an island where they could swim in the sea, hunt bugs, and sleep in hammocks while she protects them. The *us* (kids) versus *them* (grown-ups) conflict subsides as she slides from identifying with the children to being a comforting mother. While she presents her readers with the unnerving truth about death, she also demonstrates writing’s capacity to console.

Despite her attempts to comfort, Clarice’s anecdotes—intended to prove her sympathy toward animals and children—also expose her ambiguous position as both mother and peer. These vignettes occur as memories of her youth and adulthood. By reflecting on her childhood pets, she identifies herself with young readers. Even though she empathizes with children, she remains separate from them. Seeming to acknowledge the strong emotions that the animals’ deaths may provoke in her readers, she occasionally assumes a motherly role in an attempt to calm the readers’ fears: “Quem de vocês tiver medo, eu cuido e consolo. Porque sei o que é o medo que as crianças têm porque já fui criança. Até hoje ainda tenho medo de certas coisas” (60). This statement contradicts her earlier affirmation that adults do not understand children’s feelings. While the quote

illustrates her desire to provide the children with security, the murder of her son’s fish demonstrates that she too can destabilize the safety of the adult world.

In addition, Clarice’s flashbacks include moments of adult weakness. One example is her removal of a messy monkey from their home, which leads to the household’s discontent (28). Other stories illustrate her cowardice and inability to communicate upsetting news to her family. At the beginning of the book, she does not have the courage to tell the readers what happened to her son’s dead fish. In another story, a vet reports the death of their pet monkey and she has trouble revealing this information to her family. She explains, “Fiquei com os olhos cheios de lágrimas e não tinha coragem de dar esta notícia ao pessoal de casa. Afinal avisei, e todos ficaram muito, muito tristes” (32). Her repeated lack of courage makes her appear as vulnerable as a child. She says, “em muitas coisas são mais corajosos do que eu” (11). This weakness debilitates her role as a protective, comforting mother. Reducing the adult’s reliability, the ambiguous narrative presents Clarice—and her text—as a source of solace, but also reveals her cowardice, irresponsibility, and vulnerability.

In the memories Clarice shares, death abounds and the sincerity of her vow never to allow a child or animal near her to suffer is questionable (7). She frequently mentions creatures’ tragic endings abruptly or indifferently. As the severed body parts of a lizard wiggle on the ground, she shamelessly admits her joy, “Así é engraçado” (16). A cat eats a friend’s rat in “um modo horívelzinho...com a rapidez com que comemos um sanduíche.” Again, she declares her pleasure and explains her use of the diminutive, “eu digo horívelzinho porque no fundo estou bem contente” (13). To conclude a vicious dogfight she insensitively declares that, “E ele, enfim, matou Max” (42). She affirms that she would never hurt a living creature, but

has no qualms when enthusiastically or indifferently describing their deaths. Treating the animals unequally, she divides them into two groups: *bichos* whose suffering is amusing (lizards) or whose death is favored (mosquitoes and cockroaches) and those that are “bom para a gente amar e fazer carinho” (11). Additionally, her claim of innocence conflicts with the title’s use of *matar*, which reinforces the idea of her active role in the incident.

Why did the fish die? Too busy writing, Clarice forgot to feed them for three days! The narrative is both her confession and her excuse. She pleads her case, “Mas é que sou muito ocupada, porque também escrevo histórias para gente grande” (61). One of the narrator’s most questionable characteristics is her innocence. She asserts that she is not guilty, yet titles the book *O mulher que matou os peixes*. Clarice chooses to create stories instead of caring for living creatures. The lines between reality and fiction blur when Clarice explains that telling stories can distract her from other responsibilities. The reader is left to wonder whether *A mulher que matou os peixes* is a true confession or a piece of fiction.

In addition, Clarice incorporates her readers into the book by implying that they play a role in the incident. They are the audience for which she writes. As Ribeiro remarks, Clarice organizes the narrative in an attempt to make the readers accomplices in her crime. He elucidates, “Seu pedido de absolvição é feito através de histórias, uma maneira de enredar os leitores infantis no encantamento da escritura, a própria razão de seu crime” (71). Further, Ribeiro notes that when Clarice uses writing as an excuse for the fishes’ deaths, “[n]arração e história estão acontecendo naquele momento. A escritura, enquanto é vida, também assassina” (71).

While writing plays an important role, so does the *lack* of language. Living without any form of verbal expression, the “vermelhinhos” die because they cannot communicate their

hunger. Clarice tries to blame the readers and the fish for her crime. Occupied with her stories—one of which may be the book readers currently hold in their hands—she neglected her motherly duties. She indirectly suggests the readers also played a part in the fishes’ deaths; she is busy telling *them* the distracting stories. The fish are at fault as well. Not only mute, they are “comilões, coitados” (61). They are overindulgent and never satisfied. Their need is purely physical and if it cannot be achieved, they die. In addition, she blames the fish because, unlike other creatures that make noise, “mas o peixe é tão mudo como uma árvore e não tinha voz para reclamar e me chamar” (61-62). The fish die from a lack of language—their silence—and from the distraction of expressing language—writing.

Similar to the other animals in *A mulher que matou os peixes*, the fish differ from humans because they do not have language. “O homem,” says Clarice, “é o animal mais importante do mundo, porque, além de sentir, o homem pensa e resolve e fala. Os bichos falam sem palavras” (22). At the same time, she anthropomorphizes animals: the animals in the stories have human names; dogs eat lunch together (36); they cry (23). Animals approach humans, but language always separates them. Plants talk to humans, “se a gente pegar com jeito,” only when Clarice fantasizes about the enchanted island (52). The animals in *A vida íntima de Laura* are likewise confined to silence until they appear in a fantasy scene.

SHE CLUCKED: A VIDA ÍNTIMA DE LAURA

Reminiscent of *A mulher que matou os peixes*, a first person narrator interjects her comments and questions throughout *A vida íntima de Laura*. Unlike Clarice, the narrator never reveals her name or gender. Addressing her audience with *você*, she speaks directly to one person. The story describes the life of Laura, a chicken “bastante burra” who, despite her vanity, has

some ugly features (10). She and her husband Luis, a proud rooster, live “no quintal de Dona Luísa,” where Laura spends her life eating and laying eggs (10). Afraid of humans, she runs away from them clucking, “não me matem!”—which is not their intention because she “bota mais ovos em todo o galinheiro e mesmo nas vizinhanças” (12). Like the hen in “Uma Galinha” from Lispector’s *Laços de Família*, Laura is valued for her fertility.

The plot is character driven: the narrative depicts only a few events of Laura’s life: the hatching and growth of a son, her short displacement in a neighbor’s backyard, and her successful attempt to disguise herself from the cook by rubbing mud on her face. The narrator repeatedly stops the story to provide her own commentary about chickens—including the ones served for dinner. Like the subtle and unreliable narrator in “Uma Galinha,” the narrator of *A vida íntima de Laura* “aggressively calls on the reader to participate” and “plays with the reader as he would with a yo-yo” (Lastinger 135).

One of Lispector techniques to encourage reader participation is the narrator’s contradictions and ignorance, which force readers to question the validity of the story. The narrator’s authority weakens as she asks for the reader’s ideas and opinions and demonstrates her lack of comprehension about the story she tells. When setting the scene for a short anecdote, she begins, “Uma bela noite...” She then quickly remembers that it was *not* a beautiful night, “Bela coisa nenhuma! Porque foi terrível. Um ladrão de galinhas tentou roubar Laura” (16). In another conversation with the reader, she states that all Laura does is “meio errado.” Then she remembers at least two things Laura does well: eat and lay eggs (20). In addition, the narrator does not know what it feels like to sit on an egg that is about to hatch (14); why chickens like the taste of earthworms (20); or how the rooster learns to crow (19). These

uncertainties highlight the narrator’s distance from Laura and undermine her authority over the story. The narrator makes Laura appear almost human, but she also reminds the reader that Laura is a chicken who lives apart from the human world. It is unclear if the narrator considers Laura a person or an animal whose only purpose is to serve man’s needs.

The oscillation between criticism and flattery renders the depiction of Laura ambiguous. She is a dumb, simple hen with no great purpose in life. At the same time, she is “pra frente” (24), “bem vivinha” (28), and desires to live. By portraying Laura’s feelings, fears, and life, the narrator anthropomorphizes the chicken. She continues to describe Laura’s life until suddenly she states, “Existe um modo de comer galinha que se chama ‘galinha ao molho pardo’” (20). The narrative begins to resemble a cooking magazine more than a children’s book. The narrator yo-yos the reader between humanized depictions of chickens’ existence and dehumanized descriptions of chicken for dinner. The casual remarks about chicken recipes mixed with the narrator’s inquisitive comments remind the reader of Laura’s vulnerable and inhuman position and the narrator’s indifference to Laura’s plight.

The reader’s moment of epiphany—the “sudden, intense moments which produce new awareness which may be painful or exhilarating”—precedes Laura’s (Palls 64). Readers realize that humans value Laura for two reasons: her maternity and production of eggs when she is alive and her body—used for food—when she is dead. Humans kill and eat animals and Laura may suffer the same fate. Whereas this moment surfaces during an interaction with the narrator, Laura’s epiphany occurs within the narrative when the cook tells Dona Luísa that they should eat Laura before she dies of old age. No longer laying many eggs, Laura’s value as a live being declines. Although Laura hears Dona Luísa reject the idea of killing her,

she anxiously hides. A fear of death and a desire to exist now fill her previously simple life. She successfully evades the cook, who selects another chicken for dinner. Conversing with readers, the narrator describes the family's meal, "Zeferina, prima de quarto grau de Laura, apareceu numa travessa grande de prata" (24).

After the reader's and Laura's epiphanies, the narrator creates a fantasy scene similar to the island in *A mulher que matou os peixes*. In the middle of the night, an alien, Xext, arrives from Jupiter and wakes Laura because she "não é quadrado" (26). Xext asks what he can do for her and she responds, "se meu destino for ser comida, eu queria ser comida por Pelé!" (26). He reassures her that she will never be killed because he will protect her. He then returns Jupiter because his mother calls him. Although a child, Xext arrives from Jupiter, a planet named for the supreme patriarchal Roman god, and thus represents a masculine divine force who holds a moral authority over the human world. For Laura to escape her unfortunate fate, a superhuman being must save her. The narrator is incapable of protecting her own protagonist.

VOICES BEYOND AQUATIC SILENCE AND CHICKEN CLUCKS

Until Xext arrives, the story limits Laura's voice to a cluck of panic ("não me matem!") and depicts her as a dumb chicken silently moseying around Dona Luísa's yard. Similar to the animals in *A mulher que matou os peixes*, Laura has a human name, feels, and thinks, but her lack of language excludes her from the human world. However, when the text assumes a noticeably fictional form with the fantastical appearance of an alien from Jupiter, Laura's personality becomes more authentic as she is able to intelligently communicate with the alien.

The fish in *A mulher que matou os peixes* are less fortunate than Laura. No divine intervention saves them from Clarice's carelessness.

Their lack of language differentiates them from Clarice and her readers and "[t]hey are impermeable and dense. Silent and dead...." Their meaning exists "only through man" (Breisach 97-98).

The man-animal divide abates during fantasy scenes because animals, plants, and aliens speak. The fictional aspects of the stories erase the ambiguity of the animals' anthropomorphization. The conflict between man and animal disappears because communication is not limited to humans. Language brings life to the *nonhuman* (and fictional) world, just as language in the narrative describes and recreates the *human* (and real) world.

Fantasy scenes where narrators allow themselves to be "happily immersed in a moment that they understand to be fictional," imply that the "reader outside the world of the novel can, and should, do the same" (Nelson 228). The reading takes on a playful nature where the child can enter the text imaginatively or transport the story's ideas to the outside world. Waugh believes "all art is 'play' in its creation of other symbolic worlds" (34). She sees play as "facilitated by rules and roles, and metafiction operates by exploring fictional rules to discover the role of fictions in life. It aims to discover how we each 'play' our own realities" (35). Fantastical events in *A mulher que matou os peixes* and *A vida íntima de Laura* appear unexpectedly. The narrators casually continue as if nothing has changed, but readers quickly notice the incongruity of the enchanted island or the alien. These images remind children that the book is fiction and facilitate their recognition of the narrators' playfulness.

The imaginative descriptions comfort readers after episodes that cause unsettling epiphanies. In *A mulher que matou os peixes*, Clarice transports readers to an ideal, magical island after depicting an aggressive, realistic image of a world that is literally "dog-eat-dog," in which a dog named Bruno is killed by three other

dogs as retribution for Bruno killing his friend Max. Similarly, in *A vida íntima de Laura*, the cook's announcement of Laura's uselessness and Zeferina's showcase at dinner precede Xext's appearance in the story. The disturbing epiphany, produced by the text, is followed by the comforting fictionality of the same narrative that originally triggered the discomforting epiphany. The child reader is caught in a game that the narrator manipulates. However, Lispector designs the texts so readers are aware of the narratives' playful structures. As children interact with the books, they gain authority because they perceive the fiction of the stories and the narrators; the children can see the fantasy of the fiction. By showing children how the books create their own "imaginary worlds, metafiction helps [the readers] understand how the reality [they] live day by day is similarly constructed, similarly 'written'" (Waugh 18).

Throughout *A mulher que matou os peixes*, the narrator repeatedly discusses her affection for animals and children. She should be trusted with *both* and would never let either suffer. Nevertheless, fictional stories take precedence over the lives of her son's fish. A child interviewed about the book concludes, "ela trabalha muito e não dá carinho aos filhos [sic]" (Ribeiro 114). Forgetting to feed the fish implies not caring for her children. By the time Clarice returns to her confession, the narrative has discredited her claimed innocence. Similarly, the narrator of *A vida íntima de Laura* abandons Laura, requiring an imaginary being to rescue her. The fantasy scene illustrates the child's (alien's) ability to protect the mother

(Laura). The text inverts traditional roles and reveals the narrator's instability and carelessness, empowering the child to see new possibilities and to gain agency. The destabilization of narrative authority within the books also challenges adult power outside the text. The narrators' requests for reader interaction permit the questioning of the adult world and craft a space for the child's voice.

A mulher que matou os peixes and *A vida íntima de Laura*, while written for a young audience, offer sophisticated reflections on language, death, and relationships that relate to adults' lives as well as children's. Lispector uses the narrators to blur the line between fiction and reality and to create an environment where the authority and reliability of adults can be safely questioned. The narrators encourage children to engage in the text and to become actors within it. Reading becomes a game that children play as they bring the story to life.

In Lispector's children's books, language distinguishes the human world from the animal. When nonhuman, and apparently inferior creatures enter the human dimension through speech, they gain authority apart from the narrators' control. Throughout the stories, the narrators also encourage readers to develop their own language by communicating directly with the text or with an adult in the real world. Breaking with traditional children's literature, Lispector does not conceal unsettling existential concepts. Instead, she presents children with a method for coping with life's difficulties: expression.

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