

# Clarice Lispector (1920-1977)

## Gale Database: Short Story Criticism



### Overview

One of the preeminent Latin American writers of the twentieth century and a revolutionizing force in Brazilian literature, Lispector has been hailed as a brilliantly original prose stylist whose modernist narratives moved away from the regional interests of her predecessors to take up universal themes deeply rooted in the psychological drama of everyday existence. While her novels and non-fiction have enjoyed critical acclaim, it is generally agreed that Lispector's short stories are her most accessible works, and in them are found the purest expression of her major concerns: human suffering and failure; the interrelation of language, life, and identity; the effect of social constraints on individuals; the place of women in male-dominated society; and the subjective nature of reality. Like her longer works, her philosophically oriented stories are told in a stream-of-consciousness or interior-monologue style, with plot subordinated to the inner experiences of her solitary, sensitive characters. The use of paradox also characterizes her fiction, and often in her tales the

quotidian and the realm of the fantastic merge, realistic observation is coupled with poetic description, and minor events give rise to extraordinary insight. Her prose style in her short works in particular shows a poet's concern with linguistic nuance and the use of symbolism and metaphor. In addition, Lispector is celebrated as an early practitioner of poststructural and feminist writing because of her interest in the problems of language and existence, gender roles, and sexuality.

### **Biographical Information**

Lispector was reluctant to divulge information about her background to critics, so the details surrounding her birth are difficult to ascertain. Most likely she was born in the Ukraine in 1920, shortly before her family, of Jewish origin, immigrated to the Americas. She spent her early childhood in economically depressed Alagoas and Recife in northeastern Brazil before moving to Rio de Janeiro. Her mother died when Lispector was nine, and she and her sisters were raised by their father, a man of modest means but with a love of books and music. Lispector took advantage of the cultural and educational opportunities available to her in Rio de Janeiro, reading widely in Brazilian and foreign works, expressing a particular fondness for the fiction of Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf, Herman Hesse, and Fyodor Dostoevsky. She decided early that she would become a writer, and her earliest efforts from her teenage years, some of which were published posthumously in *A bela e a fera* (1979), show considerable maturity.

In 1943 Lispector married Mauro Gurgel Valente, a fellow law student at the National Faculty of Law in Rio de Janeiro. After graduating with a law degree, she began working for the Rio de Janeiro

newspaper, *A noite*. In 1944 she published her first novel, *Perto do coração selvagem*. Immediately it was applauded for its lyrical language and insightful treatment of the external events in a woman's life seen from an internal perspective. The novel was groundbreaking also because it marked a shift away from the realism and regionalism of traditional Brazilian literature to a modern aesthetic with universal and psychological concerns. Her next two novels, *O lustre* (1946) and *A cidade sitiada* (1948) were written while she lived in Europe, where her husband, then a diplomat, was posted. The couple and their two young boys moved to the United States in 1952. That year, Lispector's first collection of stories, *Alguns contos*, was published to little critical or commercial response.

Lispector separated from her husband in 1959 and resettled in Brazil with her two children. In 1960 she gained widespread recognition for *Laços de família*, an expanded version of her 1952 short story collection. The publication of the novel *A maçã no escuro* in 1961 confirmed her reputation as a major figure in Latin American letters. This was followed with several other well-received novels, including the widely read *A paixão segundo G. H.* (1964), a first-person narrative with biblical overtones. Told by a bourgeois woman, the novel centers on the strange events that lead to her existential awakening. From 1967 to 1973 Lispector wrote short weekly pieces for the *Jornal do Brasil* on a range of subjects, from interviews with other writers to short "chronicles" with fictional qualities. She remarked that her success during this period made her feel as though she was forced to play the role of the "Great Lady of Brazilian Letters," which went against her nature as an intensely private woman. In the 1970s, facing financial difficulties, she reissued many of her earlier works in new anthologies and translated works by Jack London, Walter Scott, Jules Verne, Edgar Allan Poe, Oscar Wilde, and Henry Fielding. With her last novel, *A hora da estrela* (1977), Lispector reached a broader audience as she touched on the theme of social oppression, an element some critics found wanting in her earlier works. She was diagnosed with cancer in the fall of 1977 and died a few weeks later.

## Major Works of Short Fiction

Throughout her career, Lispector constantly revised her works, reissuing old stories under new titles, modifying pieces and publishing them under the original titles, and incorporating shorter pieces into longer ones. The six stories in the 1952 collection, *Alguns contos*, appeared eight years later in *Laços de família*, together with other stories written and published while she was living abroad. The reissue of these stories in 1960 immediately captured the imagination of critics, and they continue to be regarded as the reason Lispector is considered a genius of the short story genre. Most of her best-known stories, acknowledged classics of modern Latin American literature, are included in this volume. Many of the protagonists of these tales are females, young and old, who experience epiphanies regarding their identities: in "Amor," for example, a young woman's encounter with a blind man on a tram forces her to question her regimented existence. Several stories deal with the "ties" of family and community that serve to bind and repress, as in "Feliz aniversário," a sad tale about the strained family relationships made clear during an old woman's eighty-ninth birthday party. Animals also figure prominently in these tales; for example, in "O búfalo" a woman goes to the zoo in order to experience the purity of emotion that animals enjoy, and in "O crime do professor de matemática," a man discovers his humanity when he buries a stray dog.

Lispector's third volume of stories, *A legião estrangeira*, also deals with characters awakening to their own consciousness and the reality of the external world. Another recurring theme of these stories, which are almost all told with interior voices, is human beings' isolation from one another. The most anthologized story from this volume, "A mengasem," which describes the coming-of-age of two teenagers, is a commentary on a society that does not allow individuals to choose their own identities but rigidly imposes gender roles on both men and women.

Two collections of stories from the early 1970s, *Felicidade clandestina* and *Onde estivestes de noite?*, are marked by a highly metaphorical, abstract, and self-referential style. Lispector's aesthetic sensibilities saw further development in *A via crucis do corpo*, the last volume of her stories published while she was alive. Lispector herself called these stories potentially dangerous and subversive because they deal frankly with various aspects of sexual behavior considered taboo by conventional society, including masturbation, homosexuality, bisexuality, and geriatric sex. For example, in "Ruído de passos," an eighty one-year-old woman, too old to take a lover but whose desire for sexual pleasure has never ceased, relies on the guilt-ridden practice of masturbation to relieve her torment and frustration. In "Miss Algrave," a repressed English woman finds freedom and authenticity through her sexuality after being seduced by an extraterrestrial. Gender roles in these stories are often questioned and reversed, as in "Praça Mauá," in which a transvestite who adopts and cares for a child proves to be a better mother than his married female friend.

The stories in a posthumous collection, *A bela e a fera*, comprise Lispector's earliest work, written in the early 1940s, as well as two stories penned during the last year of her life. The emphasis of these stories makes clear that pressing concerns throughout Lispector's writing career were women's issues, the irrationality of human life, and the repression of identity through societal conventions.

## Critical Reception

Lispector's potential as a major writer was recognized by Brazilian reviewers with the publication of her first novel in 1944, and critics offered immediate praise for her extraordinary flair for poetic language, intensity of expression, and the psychological complexity of her protagonists, features critics continued to admire in her later works. Lispector's reputation was established with her short story collection *Laços de família*, whose translation into English in 1972 made her one of the most respected writers of short fiction in the late twentieth century. English-language criticism of her short stories has tended to concentrate on this volume, with earlier commentators remarking on the tales' existential concerns and later critics noting the stories' use of myth, religious symbolism, animal imagery, social parody, and feminist thematics. These elements, it has been pointed out, are echoed in all her stories, and even her earliest tales reveal a young writer concerned with the problems of sexual and social identity, gender roles, and the nature of androgynous existence.

It is generally agreed that Lispector's 1974 collection, *A via crucis do corpo*, marks a transition in her development as a writer. As several critics have noted, the stories in this volume depart from her earlier works in their overtly sexual nature; their lack of focus on characters' inner being; their use of colloquial language; the presence of lower-middle-class characters; and their emphasis on the reader's role in conferring meaning to text. Initial reception to the stories was mixed. Many of Lispector's admirers believed the stories marked a decline in the quality of her work. However, others have noted that the stories use a new deconstructivist/postmodern aesthetic model to express in artful form many of her most important concerns, including sexual independence, authenticity, absurdity, male/female relationships, consciousness, and self-determination.