

**“The Smallest Woman in the World”
By Clarice Lispector**

If one assumes Lispector’s short story ironically critiques the attitudes of the ostensible protagonists (the Western observers of Little Flower), then there should be clues in the text that the reader is not supposed to identify with them. Identifying irony in tone is always dependent upon context, but one can identify some general characteristics that help with this identification:

- caricature
- parody
- hyperbole/understatement (including overwritten/underwritten passages and exaggerated/understated reactions to events)
- unreconciled absurdities, incongruities, paradoxes (unreconciled in the sense that they are allowed to exist without editorial comment that points out their problematic nature)
- situational ironies
- verbal irony (in narration)



Clarice Lispector
1920-1977

If the purpose of the text is to criticize something (as is the case in “The Smallest Woman in the World”), one can say the tone in a given passage (or the overall mood) is **satiric** (satire is obviously related to irony, but satire does not *necessarily* require irony-- though, in practice, it almost always does display irony at some point). Note, however, that not all irony of tone has a definite target.

Sometimes authors do not take themselves or their subjects seriously for other reasons (where the tone or mood might be playful, wistful, or something else entirely). Many passages in *The Famished Road*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, and *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* fit this description, where the authors are taking their characters seriously on one level-- but doing so in an ironic way that prevents the reader from completely identifying with them (e.g., Dad, Remedios the Beauty, Malta Kano). On some level, they are the object of affectionate laughter.

DIRECTIONS: Choose **ONE** of the four passages from “The Smallest Woman in the World” and analyze how the tone reveals something about Lispector’s purpose in writing the story. I’ve included four or five of your questions for each passage to help guide your answer.

This is due Friday April 12. If you turn in the assignment early enough, I will mark it up with comments and corrections as if it were a timed writing. If you turn in the finished assignment early, there will be a small grade incentive (+3 points). If you miss the midnight deadline but turn in the assignment before eight hours have elapsed, there will be a small point deduction (-3 points). If you turn in the assignment between eight and twenty-four hours late there will be a larger point deduction (-10 points). If you turn in the assignment at any point after that, there will be a substantial point deduction (-20 points). If you turn in the assignment late, but do not

want points deducted, then you must complete the same activity for TWO of the four passages.

Passage One (discovery)

- When Lispector says that the French explorer “[felt] an immediate necessity for order and for giving names to what exists,” what attitude of the explorer toward Little Flower is she trying to convey?
- The explorer compares Little Flower to an emerald when assessing her value to him. What does this reveal about his attitude toward his discovery?
- Throughout the story, Little Flower is described as a species or explicitly compared to an animal. What does this suggest?
- What is the significance of the lifestyle of the Likoualas and the “savage” Bahundes? Why does Lispector include these details about their interactions?

In the depths of Equatorial Africa the French explorer, Marcel Pretre, hunter and man of the world, came across a tribe of surprisingly small pygmies. Therefore he was even more surprised when he was informed that a still smaller people existed, beyond forests and distances. So he plunged farther on.

5 In the Eastern Congo, near Lake Kivu, he really did discover the smallest pygmies in the world. And-- like a box within a box within a box-- obedient, perhaps, to the necessity nature sometimes feels of outdoing herself-- among the smallest pygmies in the world there was the smallest of the smallest pygmies in the world.

10 Among mosquitoes and lukewarm trees, among leaves of the most rich and lazy green, Marcel Pretre found himself facing a woman seventeen and three-quarter inches high, full-grown, black, Silent-- “Black as a monkey,” he informed the press-- who lived in a treetop with her little spouse. In the tepid miasma of the jungle, that swells the fruits so early and gives them an almost intolerable sweetness, she was pregnant.

15 So there she stood, the smallest woman in the world. For an instant, in the buzzing heat, it seemed as if the Frenchman had unexpectedly reached his final destination. Probably only because he was not insane, his soul neither wavered nor broke its bounds. Feeling an immediate necessity for order and for giving names to what exists, he called her Little Flower. And in order to be able to classify her among the recognizable realities, he immediately began to collect facts about her.

20 Her race will soon be exterminated. Few examples are left of this species, which, if it were not for the sly dangers of Africa, might have multiplied. Besides disease, the deadly effluvium of the water, insufficient food, and ranging beasts, the great threat to the Likoualas are the savage Bahundes, a threat that surrounds them in the silent air, like the dawn of battle. The Bahundes hunt them with nets, like monkeys. And eat them. Like that: they catch them in nets and eat them. The tiny race, retreating, always retreating, has finished hiding away in the heart of Africa, where the lucky
25 explorer discovered it. For strategic defense, they live in the highest trees. The women descend to grind and cook corn and to gather greens; the men, to hunt. When a child is born, it is left free almost immediately. It is true that, what with the beasts, the child frequently cannot enjoy this freedom for very long. But then it is true that it cannot be lamented that for such a short life there had been any long, hard work. And even the language that the child learns is short and simple, merely the

**“The Smallest Woman in the World”
By Clarice Lispector**

30 essentials. The Likoualas use few names; they name things by gestures and animal noises. As for things of the spirit, they have a drum. While they dance to the sound of the drum, a little male stands guard against the Bahundes, who come from no one knows where.

That was the way, then, that the explorer discovered, standing at his very feet, the smallest existing human thing. His heart beat, because no emerald in the world is so rare. The teachings of the
35 wise men of India are not so rare. The richest man in the world has never set eyes on such a strange grace. Right there was a woman that the greed of the most exquisite dream could never have imagined. It was then that the explorer said timidly, and with a delicacy of feeling of which his wife would never have thought him capable: “You are Little Flower.”

Passage Two (reactions)

- While going through people’s reactions to the smallest woman in the world, Lispector details several points of view (everything from pity to disgust). What is the point of listing these reactions to her?
- Why does Lispector choose to chiefly distinguish Little Flower by her height? What is the significance of her dimensions that it takes on such importance in peoples’ mind?
- At the beginning of the story and at the end, people wish Little Flower to be pure and uncorrupted (a sort of noble savage), but she defies their expectations. What is the significance of this?
- Why is Little Flower compared to non-human things (emeralds, flowers, monkeys, dogs, toys), and how do these mental classifications relate to one another (when they would seem to have very different connotations)?
- Though Little Flower is described in terms of beauty at some points in the story (flowers, emeralds), at other points Lispector makes it clear that some do not find her beautiful. What is Lispector attempting to communicate here?

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At that moment, Little Flower scratched herself where no one scratches. The explorer-- as if he were receiving the highest prize for chastity to which an idealistic man dares aspire-- the explorer, experienced as he was, looked the other way.

10 A photograph of Little Flower was published in the colored supplement of the Sunday Papers, life-size. She was wrapped in cloth, her belly already very big. The flat nose, the black face, the splay feet. She looked like a dog.

On that Sunday, in an apartment, a woman seeing the picture of Little Flower in the paper didn’t want to look a second time because “It gives me the creeps.”

15 In another apartment, a lady felt such perverse tenderness for the smallest of the African women that-- an ounce of prevention being worth a pound of cure-- Little Flower could never be left

**“The Smallest Woman in the World”
By Clarice Lispector**

alone to the tenderness of that lady. Who knows to what murkiness of love tenderness can lead? The woman was upset all day, almost as if she were missing something. Besides, it was spring and there was a dangerous leniency in the air.

30 In another house, a little girl of five, seeing the picture and hearing the comments, was extremely surprised. In a houseful of adults, this little girl had been the smallest human being up until now. And, if this was the source of all caresses, it was also the source of the first fear of the tyranny of love. The existence of Little Flower made the little girl feel-- with a deep uneasiness that only years and years later, and for very different reasons, would turn into thought-- made her feel, in her first
35 wisdom, that “sorrow is endless.”

In another house, in the consecration of spring, a girl about to be married felt an ecstasy of pity: “Mama, look at her little picture, poor little thing! Just look how sad she is!”

In another house, a clever little boy had a clever idea. “Mummy, if I could put this little woman from Africa in little Paul’s bed when he’s asleep? When he woke up wouldn’t he be frightened?
40 Wouldn’t he howl? When he saw her sitting on his bed? And then we’d play with her! She would be our toy!” [...]

In another house, they gave themselves up to the enthralling task of measuring the seventeen and three-quarter inches of Little Flower against the wall. And, really, it was a delightful surprise: she was even smaller than the sharpest imagination could have pictured. In the heart of each member of
45 the family was born, nostalgic, the desire to have that tiny and indomitable thing for itself, that thing spared having been eaten, that permanent source of charity. The avid family soul wanted to devote itself. To tell the truth, who hasn’t wanted to own a human being just for himself? Which, it is true, wouldn’t always be convenient; there are times when one doesn’t want to have feelings.

Passage Three (dead child toy)

- Throughout the story, many of the reactions to Little Flower are described in terms of racial prejudice. Is Lispector implicitly defending this point of view, or is she critiquing society?
- What is the connection between ownership and the way that people react to Little Flower, objectifying her as a toy or slave?
- What is the connection between the mother’s expression of love for her son (conceived in terms of ownership and classification) and Little Flower? Why does this passage exist?
- The households of the Europeans who read about Little Flower stand in stark contrast to her native environment. What is the purpose of this juxtaposition within the story?

In another house, a clever little boy had a clever idea. “Mummy, if I could put this little woman from Africa in little Paul’s bed when he’s asleep? When he woke up wouldn’t he be frightened? Wouldn’t he howl? When he saw her sitting on his bed? And then we’d play with her! She would be our toy!”

5 His mother was setting her hair in front of the bathroom mirror at the moment, and she remembered what a cook had told her about life in an orphanage. The orphans had no dolls, and, with terrible maternity already throbbing in their hearts, the little girls had hidden the death of one of the children from the nun. They kept the body in a cupboard and when the nun went out they played with the dead child, giving her baths and things to eat, punishing her only to be able to kiss and console
10 her. In the bathroom, the mother remembered this, and let fall her thoughtful hands, full of curlers.

**“The Smallest Woman in the World”
By Clarice Lispector**

She considered the cruel necessity of loving. And she considered the malignity of our desire for happiness. She considered how ferociously we need to play. How many times we will kill for love. Then she looked at her clever child as if she were looking at a dangerous stranger. And she had a horror of her own soul that, more than her body, had engendered that being, adept at life and
15 happiness. She looked at him attentively and with uncomfortable pride, that child who had already lost two front teeth, evolution evolving itself, teeth falling out to give place to those that could bite better. “I’m going to buy him a new suit,” she decided, looking at him, absorbed. Obstinate, she adorned her gap-toothed son with fine clothes; obstinate, she wanted him very clean, as if his cleanliness could emphasize a soothing superficiality, obstinate perfecting the polite side of beauty. Obstinate
20 drawing away from, and drawing him away from, something that ought to be “black as a monkey.” Then, looking in the bathroom mirror, the mother gave a deliberately refined and social smile, placing a distance of insuperable milleniums between the abstract lines of her features and the crude face of Little Flower. But, with years of practice, she knew that this was going to be a Sunday on which she would have to hide from herself anxiety, dreams, and lost millenniums.

25 In another house, they gave themselves up to the enthralling task of measuring the seventeen and three-quarter inches of Little Flower against the wall. And, really, it was a delightful surprise: she was even smaller than the sharpest imagination could have pictured. In the heart of each member of the family was born, nostalgic, the desire to have that tiny and indomitable thing for itself, that thing spared having been eaten, that permanent source of charity. The avid family soul wanted to devote
30 itself. To tell the truth, who hasn’t wanted to own a human being just for himself? Which, it is true, wouldn’t always be convenient; there are times when one doesn’t want to have feelings.

“I bet if she lived here it would end in a fight,” said the father, sitting in the armchair and definitely turning the page of the newspaper. “In this house everything ends in a fight.”

“Oh, you, José-- always a pessimist,” said the mother.

35 “But, Mama, have you thought of the size her baby’s going to be?” said the oldest little girl, aged thirteen, eagerly.

The father stirred uneasily behind his paper.

“It should be the smallest black baby in the world,” the mother answered, melting with pleasure. “Imagine her serving our table, with her big little belly!”

40 “That’s enough!” growled father.

“But you have to admit,” said the mother, unexpectedly offended, “that it is something very rare. You’re the insensitive one.”

Passage Four (laughing)

- At the end of the story, the explorer seems conflicted and uncomfortable, a change from his attitude at the beginning. Why does he no longer think about the triumph of his discovery?
- The final paragraph ends with a woman invoking God as she closes her newspaper. What attitude is Lispector trying to convey, and what does it suggest about the author’s attitude toward religion?
- Little Flower seems pleased to be alive, and the explorer has difficulty classifying the outward expression of this pleasure (her laughter). What does this suggest about Lispector’s attitude toward happiness?

**“The Smallest Woman in the World”
By Clarice Lispector**

- What is different in the explorer’s idea of love and Little Flower’s idea of love? In what ways is Little Flower’s love for the explorer like his love for her? What does this reveal?
- Throughout the story there are many descriptions of eating and consuming, just as there are of classifying and owning. What do these patterns suggest?

The smallest woman in the world was laughing.

She was laughing, warm, warm-- Little Flower was enjoying life. The rare thing herself was experiencing the ineffable sensation of not having been eaten yet. Not having been eaten yet was something that at any other time would have given her the agile impulse to jump from branch to
5 branch. But, in this moment of tranquility, amid the thick leaves of the Eastern Congo, she was not putting this impulse into action-- it was entirely concentrated in the smallness of the rare thing itself. So she was laughing. It was a laugh such as only one who does not speak laughs. It was a laugh that the explorer, constrained, couldn’t classify. And she kept on enjoying her own soft laugh, she who wasn’t being devoured. Not to be devoured is the most perfect feeling. Not to be devoured is the
10 secret goal of a whole life. While she was not being eaten, her bestial laughter was as delicate as joy is delicate. The explorer was baffled.

In the second place, if the rare thing herself was laughing, it was because, within her smallness, a great darkness had begun to move.

The rare thing herself felt in her breast a warmth that might be called love. She loved that
15 sallow explorer. If she could have talked and had told him that she loved him, he would have been puffed up with vanity. Vanity that would have collapsed when she added that she also loved the explorer’s ring very much, and the explorer’s boots. And when that collapse had taken place, Little Flower would not have understood why. Because her love for the explorer-- one might even say
20 “profound love,” since, having no other resources, she was reduced to a profundity-- her profound love for the explorer would not have been at all diminished by the fact that she also loved his boots. There is an old misunderstanding about the word love, and, if many children are born from this misunderstanding, many others have lost the unique chance of being born, only because of the susceptibility that demands that it be me! me! that is loved, and not my money. But in the humidity of
25 the forest, these cruel refinements do not exist, and love is not to be eaten, love is to find a boot pretty, love is to like the strange color of a man who isn’t black, is to laugh for love of a shiny ring. Little Flower blinked with love, and laughed warmly, small, gravid, warm.

The explorer tried to smile back, without knowing exactly to what abyss his smile responded, and then he was embarrassed as only a very big man can be embarrassed. He pretended to adjust his explorer’s hat better; he colored, prudishly. He turned a lovely color, a greenish-pink, like a lime at
30 sunrise. He was undoubtedly sour.

Perhaps adjusting the symbolic helmet helped the explorer to get control of himself, severely recapture the discipline of his work, and go on with his note-taking. He had learned how to understand some of the tribe’s few articulate words, and to interpret their signs. By now, he could ask questions.

Little Flower answered “Yes.” That it was very nice to have a tree of her own to live in.
35 Because-- she didn’t say this but her eyes became so dark that they said it-- because it is good to own, good to own, good to own. The explorer winked several times.

Marcel Pretre had some difficult moments with himself. But at least he kept busy taking notes. Those who didn’t take notes had to manage as best they could.

“Well,” suddenly declared one old lady, folding up the newspaper decisively, “Well, as I always
40 say: God knows what He’s doing.”