

Love (and woman): an (im)possible conversation between Clarice Lispector and Sartre

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to analyze Clarice Lispector's short story "Love" according to categories proposed by Sartre in *Being and nothingness*: to see and to be seen, functionality and love. We focus on the scene described by Clarice in her text, in which Ana – a housewife, always busy serving her family ("pure functionality"), comes across a blind man chewing gum on one of her shopping trips. Yet a blind man has an eye that doesn't see, and thus is an eye without a function. It is this experience that opens Ana up to the dimension of love, in a very specific sense (indicative of gender relationships), and for which Sartre's phenomenological description seems somewhat limited.

Key Words: Love; Woman; Clarice Lispector; Sartre.

In "Love,"¹ Clarice Lispector tells the story of Ana, a housewife busy trying to fulfill her duties as a wife and mother. She is completely absorbed in her predictable small world and daily routine. It is safe to say that she depends more on her own servitude than do the people who are supposed to benefit from it. There are times during the day in which Ana senses "danger" close by: something like a gap, a lack, a feeling of emptiness. It is this "split" that Clarice then explores. One afternoon, Ana takes the streetcar after going shopping. While watching the landscape go by, Ana sees a blind man chewing gum. In that moment, this rather trivial scene takes on an unpredictable dimension: Ana is invaded

¹ Lispector, 1974, p. 21-31.

by the most profoundly compassionate feeling, so overwhelming that it is almost nauseating.

Completely taken aback by the experience, the character does not even realize that the streetcar has left. She drops the egg cart she had bought, an incident which takes her away from the predictable, from the repetitive tracks of her daily life, from her mediocre day-to-day existence. She remains in this state for quite awhile gazing at things and at people in an unusual manner. It is through this state that Clarice reveals or points to Ana's experience in relation to her own choice (her life as a mere possibility, as "chosen") and the deconstructive anguish that at the same time offers the possibilities of new choices. But this does not happen. The character becomes dizzy with the prospect of facing her inner depth.

Upon her return home, Ana makes an effort to plunge again in her daily life, feeling "guilty" when she sees her son. "It is for the children!" (Isn't this the way so many women justify it?). She tries to squeeze the vastness she experienced into the narrowness of her kitchen, her bedrooms, through cleaning and through her domestic relations, which are totally known to her, totally predictable and totally exhausted. It is her own husband who brings her back to her closed, lukewarm and windowless little world.

Two essential questions for the present essay emerge here. Why did Clarice call this short story "Love?" And why does the story use a blind man as a transitional object, the one who provides a cut, interrupts the pain, and removes the character from her functionality as a housewife to her state of being dazed.

Lets us start with the second question. In *Being and Nothingness*², Sartre emphasizes the importance of the other's gaze in freezing the traits of the being-for-itself as in-itself. This means the objectification of the being-for-itself that feels and sees itself facing the other as an object. Furthermore, Sartre also says that we can put/capture the other in terms of pure functionality: indifference. In his words:

It is a lack of awareness in relationship to the other [...]. I almost never pay attention; I act as if I were alone in the world; I touch people lightly as I touch the wall lightly; I avoid them as I avoid obstacles; their object-liberty is for me nothing more than the coefficient of adversity; I don't even imagine they can look at me [...]. These people are functions: the person selling the ticket is nothing more than his ticket-collecting function; the waiter is nothing more than his function of serving his customers.³

And why not continue? The mother may be identified by her function of tending to her children, feeding them, overseeing their schedule and their studies, etc; the wife by her function of preparing food, showing affection toward her husband and satisfying him sexually, etc. It seems that the character described by Clarice fits the profile of s/he "frozen" by the gaze of others: she is transparent; she is pure functionality; she guarantees that the household and the family run smoothly. Let us look closely: she is frozen as pure instrument by other people's "blindness". Yet there is something in the story that also points to the "benefits" of this position: a cushion for the anguish inherent in her own freedom and in her choices. The character does not enter into conflict with the other's gaze, as we could presuppose from a Sartrean reading. Instead, she nurtures herself

² Sartre, 1997.

³ Sartre, 1997, p.474.

through this gaze; she identifies with its reflection as if it were her own. That is, she, the character, objectifies herself or reduces herself to the other, to its own function of gazing. That is how she needs to be seen. This does not simply happen to her: it is her choice. “She will plant the seeds she had in her hands, not other seeds, but only the seeds she had in her hands [...] the trees that she planted laughed at her at some point in the afternoon. When nothing else needed her force, she became restless.”⁴ This way of maintaining the other in its gazing functionality does not represent a conflict, but is homeostasis/ not the passive, calm, neutral kind, but tense. It is not about an “either/or” reductionist way of thinking, but is rather about a complex “and,” which results in a system that is “alive,” that follows a process. As opposed to other texts that offer a two-fold possibility to its female characters – “either to reflect the masculine imaginary, metonymy and metaphor for an oppressive ideology, or to lose oneself in the emptiness of craziness and marginalization”⁵ - we believe that Clarice’s story “indicates new possibilities for the cultural imaginary by providing new questions and reactivating the imaginary toward a new direction.”⁶

Furthermore, Sartre thinks about subjectivity in the subject-object relationship as a part of a scheme in which “I either conquer you or I will be conquered.” It is all about “winning.” It is not about living with. The question is now: what do I have of the other and what part of me is in the other? If during the 1970s the literary critique of Lispector’s work followed in Benedito Nunes’ footsteps in his existentialist and universalist tendencies⁷, we argue here that Clarice’s story can in fact deconstruct the Sartrian concept - which is in our view binary and patriarchal - on the meaning of love. Furthermore, this story about love opens new ways to contemplate “women.” By “destabilizing *gender* stereotypes and by challenging the ways in which the patriarchal power is articulated, Lispector also dismantles the base of essentialisms.”⁸

For Sartre, the highest point in awareness of freedom takes place exactly when one has the feeling of being objectified by the other (when I feel like I am about to lose my freedom). But, this does not happen in the case of Ana, the character in Clarice Lispector’s story. As we see, the character’s reduction to her functionality does not represent anguish, but rather relief:

Deep down, Ana always had the need to feel deeply rooted into things. And a home provided her with that feeling, however perplexing. She had fallen into a woman’s fate by the way of a crooked path, even though she was surprised she fit the role as neatly as if she had created it herself. The man she married was a truthful man, the children she had were truthful children. [...] That is how she had wanted it and that is what she had chosen. Her worry was reduced to taking care of each family member and their functions during that dangerous afternoon hour, when the house was empty and not in need of her care anymore, when the sun was high up in the sky. When she stared at the clean furniture, her heart tightened a little bit in astonishment. But in her life there was no place for regarding her own astonishment with a feeling of tenderness – she suffocated it with the same ability that she did the work in the household. She would then go out shopping or take things to get repaired, in other words, she would take care of the home and of the family in spite of them.⁹

⁴ Lispector, 1974, p. 21.

⁵ Brandão, 2004, p. 56.

⁶ Helena, 1997, p. 28.

⁷ Helena, 1997, p. 38.

⁸ Helena, 1997, p. 106.

⁹ Lispector, 1974, p. 22.

She needs to be useful, functional.¹⁰ Clarice describes the character's life choice as big gesture of acceptance that gave her face "a woman's look".

On one of her outings destined to maintain the functionality of her family (going shopping, etc.), Ana is faced with the unexpected and the dormant. There is a very interesting aspect of the story here which makes us put Sartre's own ideas in check: it is the appearance of the blind man, the moment when she sees the blind man.

Thus, everything was going "well" in this character's daily life (doing her shopping), everything was predictable until that day in the streetcar when she saw a blind man chewing gum. We can ask ourselves what is so strange about this. One answer becomes evident: the blind person has an eye that cannot see. The functionality of the eye is to look, yet for the blind man, the eye is a thing. The blind man's eye is an inside out mirror: a black hole, into which the character becomes sucked to the depths of her soul, in a pure state of hatred, daze, piety and disgust. "It was a blind man [...]. Reclined, she stared at the blind man deeply as we look at what does not see us [...], as if he had insulted her; that is how Ana stared at him. People who may have seen her would have had the impression that she was a hateful woman."¹¹

The groundwork has been opened (before there was the maintenance of what the other's gaze had reduced her to and at the same time nurtured her: pure functionality) and therefore now there is the possibility that the character will be confronted with her own lack of groundwork: her freedom. Dizziness... Her choices now become resented as mere possibilities. In other words, the awareness of freedom at its highest peak occurs, in this case, when the other's gaze disappears, when there is no longer support and protection: everything tumbles down. Lost in this hole, Ana does not notice the streetcar leaving and lets the eggs fall from her bag. Some of the eggs break when they hit the ground:

The deed was done [...]. Even the things that existed before this happened now appeared cautious. They had a more hostile look to them, they had become perishable... The world was once more transformed into something uncomfortable. Many years crashed as the yellow yokes ran down the street [...] she had made peace with life, she had been so careful for her life not to explode. She used to maintain everything with serene comprehension, she separated a person from the others, the clothes were clearly made to be used and she could pick and choose the evening film from the newspaper – everything was done so that one day followed the other. And just to think that a blind man chewing gum could take all that apart.¹²

The character feels so out of place in her own little world, so estranged from her habits, places, time and her mundane and repetitive way of living that she ends up falling into an "extremely painful kind of goodness." The emphasis is then placed on the eye that does not see, the eye without a function, thus dismantling the functionality of Ana's world. We believe that the blind man is in fact just a "mediator for Ana's latent incompatibility with the world,"¹³ but choosing blindness as an opening up of the character's world raises important questions regarding gender.

¹⁰ However, we disagree with Berta Waldman, for whom Ana seems to be a woman who is calm and at peace with herself. See Waldman, 1992.

¹¹ Lispector, 1974, p. 23.

¹² Lispector, 1974, p. 24-25.

¹³ Nunes, 1995, p. 85.

In first place, it is important to emphasize the fact that the main character is a woman enslaved by the other's gaze and by her own self. This relationship between the woman and the other's gaze and between the woman and the act of being gazed at is a theme that has been discussed, commented and revised at length by psychoanalysis.¹⁴ The question then is: is this choice in the story gratuitous? Why does Clarice say that her great "acceptance" transformed her face into a "woman's face?" And finally, why did she call the story "Love?"

Sartre, in his book *Being and Nothingness*, situates the experience of love as the first attitude towards another person, together with language and masochism. He says that "love is an undertaking; it is an organic ensemble of projects towards my own possibilities."¹⁵ Nevertheless, love is conflict because it places us in direct relationship with another person's freedom. Hence Sartre's quote, which nowadays has become almost a slogan, "hell is the other." But this hell does not become indefinitely established in Clarice's story. The opposite occurs. In the absence of a struggle, in the absence of a conflict between husband and wife, peace is affirmed through the homeostasis between the functionality of gazing and the functionality of being gazed upon. It is a blind man through this inability of seeing that opens the character to other possibilities beyond her functionality. It is he that opens the door to conflict, which she had previously avoided. After "moving beyond" it, Ana goes to the Botanic Gardens, still dazed, astonished and surprised at the rawness of life: "The world's rawness was calm. The murder was profound. And death was not what we thought it was. [...] The trees were full of abundance, the world was so rich that it was about to rot."¹⁶ Something happens to the character that goes beyond life, pulse, force and throbbing rawness: "Her piety toward the blind man felt as violent as agony, but the world felt as if it was hers, dirty, perishable, but hers nonetheless."¹⁷

Ana remains in this state for quite awhile. It is important to note that Clarice calls "love" this state of being open. But as a woman and in her functionality of being a mother, Ana remembers that it is afternoon and the children will be coming home... There is guilt. There is death. The character then runs home and for "an instant the healthy life that she experienced so far seemed like an insane lifestyle."¹⁸

Her son runs to her embrace. Ana hugs the child forcefully, with a sense of fright. She tries to protect him even though she is shaking: "because life is dangerous. She loved the world, she loved what had been created – she loved it with a sense of grief and repugnance."

She hugged her son so tight it almost hurt him. She hugged him as if she knew that something terrible could happen – the blind man or the Botanic Garden? She held him close. He was the one she loved the most. She had been hit by the demon's faith. Life is horrible, she whispered in a hungry tone. What would she do if she followed the blind man's call? She needed them... I am afraid, she said. There were poor and rich places in need of her help. She felt the delicate ribs of her child between her arms and heard his fearful cry. Mommy, the boy called. She pulled him away and looked at his face. Her heart shrunk. Don't let mommy forget about you, she

¹⁴ See Irigaray, 1977; Isarel, 1995; Nasio, 1991; Freud, 1974, among others.

¹⁵ Sartre, 1997, p. 457.

¹⁶ Lispector, 1974, p. 27.

¹⁷ Lispector, 1974, p. 28.

¹⁸ Lispector, 1974, p. 28.

said. The child barely waited to free himself from his mother's grip. He then ran to his room where he stood at the door and stared at his mother, now at a safe distance. It was the worse stare ever.¹⁹

The gaze is no longer maternal. There was a rupture in this function. The gaze reflected more of an absence, an "opening." The son senses something strange about her: the "key," as Sartre points out regarding the functionality of the other does not appear; it is not efficient. "Where is my mother?," asks the boy, calling for her. "Knowing the 'keys' and the 'key words' will make it possible for me to utilize them according to my advantage and to unleash its mechanisms,"²⁰ in other words, to bring Ana back to her function as a mother.

We believe that Sartre's phenomenological description of the experience of love does not adequately address the specific experience of love Clarice describes in her story and it does not inscribe this relationship with the other, this inter-subjectivity (despite the fact that she opened up through the "blind" other, an interaction that in turn made her viable). It is through the absence of the functionality of the other's gaze that Ana realizes the emptiness, now unbearable, of this small world reduced to cleaning, cooking, and taking care of her husband and her children:

What was she ashamed of? There was no way to run away. The days she had forged had broken through a crust and the water was now flowing freely. She was facing the oyster. There was no way to ignore it. What was she ashamed of? It was no longer about piety. Her heart was filled with a dreadful will to live.²¹

Functional homeostasis is interrupted. She is invaded by an intense flux of life, of possibilities. Ana is afraid of such intensity (the experience of love according to Clarice Lispector) and therefore goes to the kitchen to help the maid prepare dinner. She continues to feel invaded by this current which makes her miss small, but nonetheless intense signs of life that surround her: spiders, flies, beetles, etc.) Her husband, her brothers and their wives arrive at the house. Dinner was good despite the fact that she only used a few eggs."²² Ana tries really hard to reclaim her little place... They talk at the table, they laugh and they entertain themselves. "And as she would treat a butterfly, Ana apprehends the instant between her fingers before it could ever become hers."²³

When the guests leave, Ana feels even more touched and moved by her experience. It was vital and brutal. "Would she be able to contain what the encounter with the blind man had unleashed in her? How long would it take before the experience became old again? Any move and she could step over one of the children."²⁴ She then hears a bursting noise coming from the kitchen. Frightened, she then realizes that it was just a small accident. Her husband had spilled the coffee. She tells him she does not want anything to happen to him. It is important to note that he is the person that restores her to her small world:

¹⁹ Lispector, 1974, p. 29. The emphasis is ours.

²⁰ Sartre, 1997, p. 474.

²¹ Lispector, 1974, p. 29.

²² Lispector, 1974, p. 31.

²³ Lispector, 1974, p. 31.

²⁴ Lispector, 1974, p. 31.

It is time to go to bed, he says, it is late. In an unusual gesture, but one at that moment seemed natural, he held his wife's hand and led her away without hesitation, removing her from life's danger. It was the end of the type of kindness that made you dizzy. If she crossed love and its hell, now she was combing her hair in front of the mirror and for an instant there was no world in her heart. Before going to bed she blew out the day's flame as if she were blowing out a candle.²⁵

Ana's story concludes while she is looking at herself in the mirror. But what is a mirror? "A mirror is the only invented material that is natural. The person who stares at a mirror and is able to see it without seeing himself or herself reflected in it and the person who is able to understand that the depth of the mirror consists of being empty, this person understands the underlying mystery."²⁶ Ana does not see the void – contemplated and opened up by the blind man's eye – instead, she sees her own image reinserted in her trivial daily life. "Her gazing at the mirror signals the unfolding of the subject, which sees herself as the other, objective and impersonal."²⁷

Therefore, we realize that in this story the character is not opened by love, neither in relationship to her husband nor to her son. The opening takes place during her unexpected encounter with a blind man. It is perhaps in the fertile possibility of not being looked at, at least not in a certain way (as in her functionality whether in relation to the home, the family or beauty; homeostasis in which women maintain themselves), that there is some space left for the vastness of the world, a world which cannot be reduced nor actively accepted in what Clarice calls woman's fate. We can, in turn, relate this thought to what Sartre termed as ill will. It is in the absence of that foundation and in the lack of support that her personal choice becomes a mere possibility. The question of what to do with this experience points to possible outcomes from which Ana ends up choosing functionality. What is a woman's fate? Clarice maybe indirectly and subtly pointed to a question and a critique. Is it possible for women to have different fates? Is it possible to have a woman's fate without ill will? Or could it be that a woman's fate with no ill will would be viewed as masculine in our society? These are questions this story has raised.

Let us make Cixous'²⁸ words our own. "Where the philosopher loses his breath, she (Lispector) continues. She goes further, beyond all knowledge [...]. She does not know anything. She did not read the philosophers. Yet, sometimes one has the impression that they are murmuring in her forests. She discovers everything."

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²⁵ Lispector, 1974, p. 31.

²⁶ Lispector, 1973, p. 94.

²⁷ Nunes, 1995, p. 107.

²⁸ Cixous, 199, p. 115.

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(This article was received in May of 2006 and accepted for publication in February of 2007.)