

LEITMOTIF IN BEIRA DE ESTRADA

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Rene Wellek, discussing the dangers involved in isolating a narrative convention observes,

"We are likely to accumulate isolated observations, specimens of the marked traits, and to forget that a work of art is a whole."¹

Fully bearing in mind this warning, I purpose to analyze the literary function of "Leitmotif" within the much anthologized Brazilian short story *Beira de estrada* by Darcy Azambuja. It will be my intention to demonstrate the method by which this seemingly inconsequential narrative device attains major significance within the work, becoming germane in its total conception and comprehension.

Wolfgang Kayser defines the term leitmotif as

"...the repeated appearance of a determined object in novels and short stories."²

This narrative convention is sometimes referred to by the Italian term "retornello" and is further defined as

"...a recurrent word, phrase, situation, object or idea... which... occurs within a single work: it is any repetition that helps unify the work."³

Azambuja masterfully employs this literary topos in a short story which until this time has served only as an exam-

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- (1) Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*. New York, 1956. p. 171.
 - (2) Wolfgang Kayser, *Interpretación y análisis de la obra literaria*. Madrid, 1961. p. 90.
 - (3) Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, and William Brut, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Boston, 1960. p. 57.

ple of regionalistic writing.⁴ The leitmotif in question is a trellised vine of honeysuckles, “uma latada de madressilvas.” Forming part of the narrative landscape, its initial introduction to the story would perhaps go unnoticed by the reader if it were not for the fact that its function in the exposition is to foreshadow the description of the main character.

“De um lado, derramando-se sôbre a cerquinha de sarrafos, perfurando o ar em redor, na primavera e no verão, florescia uma linda latada de madressilvas.”⁵ (p. 181)

This description mirrors and foreshadows the tone of the characterization of the old gaucho Chico Pedro, “. . .aquela figura tranqüila de gaúcho velho. . .” (p. 181).

The second mention of the leitmotif serves also to foreshadow. “Pelo arbustos em torno e na latada de madressilvas as cigarras iam estridulando.” (p. 184) The strident chirping of the crickets on the honeysuckle combined with “um canto triste de pomba” (p. 184); the sad cooing of a dove, adds a discordant note which stands in opposition to the overall peacefulness of the summer day. “Tôda a doçura do fim verão sorria na claridade do ar. . .” (p. 184) This note of the leitmotif introduces the section of the narrative in which old Pedro reflects upon the pain that his son’s life has caused him.

“E assim pensando no que lhe era a sombra negra da vida, Chico Pedro, havia mais de hora, chupava o chimarrão, pitando o cigarro de palha.” p. 186)

The leitmotif occurs again in the main body of the narrative. It presently functions to add continuity to the story and contributes to the dramatic flow. “No ar quieto e fino da manhã o perfume das madressilvas subia e espalhava-se docemente.” (p. 187) By employing the trellis of honeysuckle vines as a focal point, the narrator has smoothly turned the reader’s attention from the melancholy scene of the two old people grieving to the following episode in which the traveler Zeferino da Cotilha Alta appears.

(4) William L. Grossman, *Modern Brazilian Short Stories*. Berkeley, 1967. pp. 1, 45.

D. Lee Hamilton and Ned C. Fahs, *Contos do Brasil*. New York, 1955. p. 248.

(5) Citations from *Beira de estrada* in my text are from the 7th edition of

After old Chico Pedro learns of the brutal death of his son, João Torto, the narrator once again utilizes the leitmotif.

“E ninguém pôde atinar, depois, com o motivo por que o velho Chico Pedro nunca mais veio sentar-se para matear, na frente da casa, onde até as madressilvas, por falta de cuidado, foram murchando e morredo.” (p. 191)

This time its function is to express directly the old man's reactions and feelings. By projecting Pedro's state of being on an external object, the author is able to express intangible emotions in concrete terms.

The uses of the trellis as a leitmotif have progressed from a foreshadowing of character mood, to its use as the focal point of narrative shift and to its present function as an extension of the main character. Chico Pedro, like the vines, in withering and dying since he need no longer continue doing contrition for the evil of his son. Again, the obvious element of foreshadowing is utilized by the leitmotif for old Pedro dies within the year. “Um ano, ainda, êle atendeu aos passantes.” (p. 191)

The main character is now so closely linked with the leitmotif that the time of his death is not expressed in terms of the seasonal year as was his wife's.

“Num comêço de inverno, a velhinha murreu.” (p. 191)
It is expressed in terms of the cycle of honeysuckle vines.
“...e o último pé de madressilvas não tinha ainda florescido quando enterraram Chico Pedro” (p. 191)

After the death and enterrement of Pedro the farm falls into disuse and with it the honeysuckle trellis. “...a latada de madressilvas caiu... (p. 192) With death there comes decay,

“...uma tapera sem história, uma tapera tranqüila, que ha-de agasalhar os bichos... E, por fim, os escombros mesmo, aos poucos, como a vida daqueles bons velhos... hão de lentamente desaparecer no chão verde das coxilhas.” (p. 192)

The function of the leitmotif here is to unify and symbolize a return to the earth. Through this return to the earth there is a symbolic reconciliation of father and son, long denied in life and realized only through death. At this point there is a fusion of the human and natural world in a pan-

theistic union reminiscent of the final paragraph of James Joyce's short novel *The Dead*.

It has now become apparent to the reader that the leitmotif of the honeysuckle vines has grown in function and must now be considered a fully developed archetypal symbol,

“...that is, a typical or recurring image. I mean by an archetype a symbol which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience.”⁶

The author, by equating the character of Chico Pedro to the archetype of the vine, now utilizes the leitmotif in its final function. The vine has existed in Christian symbology as an “emblem of Christ,”⁷ and through the previous linking of the archetype the character of Chico Pedro takes on the proportions of a Christ figure. The reader need only recall the scene of the old man scalding his hands after learning of his son's death — “...deixou cair a cuia, queimando as mãos com a água quente...” (p. 190) — to realize that Azambuja knowingly or unknowingly has accommodated the Christian myth of redemption, a myth in which someone is delivered from sin by a sacrifice made on behalf of the sinner.

Through good works and physical suffering the old man performs the sacrifices necessary for the redemption of his own son's sins. The suggestion to old Pedro by Zeferino⁸ to apply olive oil to soothe the pain of his scalded hands — “Ponha azeite, que le garanto que não dói mais.” (p. 190) — utilizes the traditional religious symbol of oil⁷ which is used to consecrate and make ready for death. Old Pedro having done his earthly contrition is now ready to die.

Beira de estrada, usually considered solely as an example of Brazilian regionalism, exemplifies the masterful usage of leitmotif which, apart from creating structural unity, transcends this function lending itself to a study of literary typology. This effectively combines the rich folkloric tradition of gaucho literature with the more universal myths common to all literatures.

No galpão, contos gauchescos, Editôra Globo. Pôrto Alegre, 1955.

(6) Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*. New York, 1968. p. 99.

(7) Gertrude Jobes, *Dictionary of Myths Folklore and Symbols*. New York, 1961. pp. 1650-1.

(8) Note the symbolic usage of the appellation “Zeferino.” His function within the story is to link the old man to the outside world in the style of the personification of the west wind, Zepher in Greek mythology.