

THE DEATH OF ONESELF AND THE MEANING OF LIFE IN “NERO” BY MIGUEL TORGA

Maria Luísa de Castro SOARES*
Maria João de Castro SOARES**

- **ABSTRACT:** This paper aim is to analyze the short story “Nero”, which is part of the work *Bichos* by Miguel Torga, following the hermeneutic method. In a first moment, some emphasis is given to the relations between the man, the environment, and the work of the poet from Trás-os-Montes who gives voice, to the tellus mater through his writing. In a second instance, the focus of this work is on the questions of finitude and the meaning of life, which involve responsibility, freedom, goals setting, and personal choices.
- **KEYWORDS:** Meaning of Life; Death; short story; “Nero”; Miguel Torga; *Bichos*.

The Author and His Work

It is relevant to point out Miguel Torga’s image as a man, a doctor, and a writer, even though he himself states that “a poet has no biography, he has destiny” (Torga, 2011, p. 278).¹

In *Diary V*, he conducts his “examination of conscience” (Torga, 1951, p. 17) and on April 7, 1949, he writes the following meta-text in which he seeks to self-define as a poet:

Throughout everything the artist goes through:
First, through the joy
of considering himself a creator
In the bosom of nature;
Then, through the sadness
Of seeing what he has made die,
Without having in his hands the certainty
Of raising the dream again. (Torga, 1951, p. 17).

* Universidade de Trás-os-Montes e Alto Douro (UTAD), Escola de Ciências Humanas e Sociais, Departamento de Letras, Artes e Comunicação, Vila Real – Portugal. Universidade de Coimbra (UC), Faculdade de Letras, Centro de Estudos Clássicos e Humanísticos, Coimbra - Portugal. ORCID: orcid.org/0000-0002-4664-8190. isoares@utad.pt.

** Universidade de Coimbra (UC), Faculdade de Letras, Centro de Estudos Clássicos e Humanísticos, Coimbra - Portugal. ORCID: orcid.org/0000-0002-4674-1045. msoares@fmed.uc.pt.

¹ On the biographical aspects of the author, see Rocha (2000).

Artigo recebido em 25/04/2023 e aprovado em 20/08/2023.

Between creative genius and the uncertainty of creation, all of Torga's writing reveals an introspective, shy man, isolated from the world and social relationships, with a profound attachment to the land and rural life. According to Miguel Torga's own words in his work *Diary XV*: "A long life is enough for everything. To be born in obscurity in Trás-os-Montes [and] to toil like a Moor [hard work] in adolescence in the lands of Santa Cruz" (Torga, 1990, p. 172).

His struggle began very early when he had to leave Trás-os-Montes and S. Martinho de Anta, the village where he was born in Portugal, to go to Brazil, where he arrived at the age of thirteen. This physical separation from his parent's home, however, left him with fond memories of the land and its people, as he wrote in his *Diary VII*:

In essence, it was good that I left the paternal home almost at birth. I always saw the straws of the nest as comforting feathers. There was no time for the slightest erosion. Wrapped in a dome of nostalgia that was never shattered, childhood impressions retain all the purity of a dawn without dusk. Timeless and mythical, the geographic landscape is a perpetual mirage to my senses; as for the human landscape, I discover such virtues in it that it seems I am truly a person only when I am close to it. (Torga, 1983, p. 65-66).

Having studied medicine, his work as a physician, which he conducted concurrently with his career as a writer, is regarded by him as equally serious and significant as writing. Both activities leave profound imprints on the person, whether they are made with a pen or a scalpel. The medical profession influenced his perspective and understanding of the world, enriching his knowledge of individuals and the myriad of issues that envelop them. As a doctor, Torga was an open individual, capable of listening to other's confessions and providing them with encouragement. As a writer, he reveals himself to be more reserved, isolated and unable to confide, except within his writings. The roles of a doctor and a writer do not always maintain a peaceful coexistence in the same person. The roles of a doctor and a writer do not always maintain a peaceful coexistence in the same person. There are moments when the poet bothers the doctor, and vice versa, and a person with two images ends up emerging: one who has dreams and ideals and therefore resembles the young; the other who understands and treats the elderly and is thus no less useful. The empirical being is entwined with this duality: at times he is an individualistic man, unique, and different, who isolates himself from the world and finds liberation through creation; at other times, he is the social man, the doctor who maintains constant contact with those around him and offers them support and encouragement.

The "Wonderful Kingdom" of Trás-os-Montes is the author's fictionalized portrayal of his childhood, his greatest love, and his focus of interest (Torga, 2018, p. 23-24, 33). It appears throughout his work, consistently celebrated as a land of both God and the Gods (Torga, 2018). It is not solely his land; it is also the land of all those who seek to deserve it. This profound admiration for the land drives the author of *Bichos* to value and poetically extol this mythical kingdom or place of rugged, earthy terrain closely associated with the human and sociocultural landscape. In this rough segment of Trás-os-Montes land,

he perceives what others may not and presents his truth without reservation, embracing reality, people, relationships, events, and facts, unafraid to challenge the *status quo* (Feijó, 2009; Soares, 2015). Simultaneously, he remains committed to his core beliefs, readily adjusting his positions when his truth necessitates it.

Torga has always fought for independence and human dignity, with his eyes-set on the people he feels a part of, and never consenting, at any moment, for the people to be deceived. Nonconformist with the abuses of power, in his struggle he displays a proud and conscious rudeness, revealing a personality endowed with an unwavering and solitary capacity for resistance. Throughout his career as a writer, he continuously sought, through his creative endeavors, to catalyze change in the world. The decision to adopt the pseudonym Miguel Torga was not arbitrary. The name Miguel evokes poets he admires, such as Cervantes and Unamuno, while the surname Torga, or heather, symbolizes the wild plant that grows in the rugged soil of all of Portugal but is particularly abundant in the mountains of Trás-os-Montes.

In his work, Miguel Torga reveals himself as a humanist who vehemently opposes social hypocrisy, tyranny, the erosion of freedom, and violations of human rights, expressing his rebellion against injustices. And, as he can only express himself through writing, he wages his battle through the poet's pen, a condition in which, as a creative genius or as a being inspired by the Muses, he finds himself in various ways.

In fact, most of the time he seeks solace in writing, where, there is a reflection on poetry and the condition of the poet (Sequeira, 1994), as well as a vision of Portugal, Iberia, and many universal human values. This holds true even when the central characters are animals, as is the case in the work *Bichos* (Soler, 1994).

The primary element in *Bichos* is the earth (Soares, 2015). It gives birth to all beings, generates everything, and harvests everything in an eternal cycle that oscillates between two facets - life and death – as a reality that continually renews itself.

The earth is maternalized both as the locus of death-birth metamorphoses and as the place of birth. And, on the other hand, the almost ventral cavities of the earth, imbued with diffuse maternal analogies, will evoke ideas and cults of death-rebirth and thus dialectically specify the theme of telluric motherhood. (Morin, 2002, p. 171).

It is certain that, for Miguel Torga, the earth is the telluric womb from which the first men, all beings, and the constituent elements of nature emanated. Due to this cosmic structure of the earth, which encompasses everything surrounds the beings, it generates a feeling of physical solidarity with space, forming an enduring partnership with humanity. Therefore, the poet only experiences fulfillment when in contact with this reality. The earth thus emerges as a mother-goddess, possessing an inexhaustible capacity to bear fruits, serving as the place where the poet seeks strength and finds fidelity (Lopes, 1993).

The passion that Torga reveals for his origins, his deep interest in understanding the place and its people, leads him to immerse himself in the land in search of his identity and in the hope that it may be the liberating image of the human condition.

Throughout the short stories of *Bichos*, the earth also assumes an essential importance. It is both a mother and a stepmother, as the earth is the generator of life and the cradle of death.

Bichos is included in the Portuguese “National Reading Plan”² for students in the 3rd cycle of basic education (which covers students aged between 12 and 14 years). Although it was not originally written for child readers as its explicit extratextual audience, it can be considered a work with dual reception, ambivalent literature, or crossover literature. This Torga’s work is composed of short stories in which a close connection between humans and animals is unveiled, with humans sometimes appearing almost as irrational beings, while the animals possess souls, emotions, and certain human-like characteristics (Silva, 2008). In fact, in this array of animals, humans are not absent, living and coexisting alongside one another. So that, the “beasts” in each short story may represent animals with human feelings or humans dressed as animals. In the Torguian universe “men and beasts” share many common traits (Santos, 1997, p. 125-146).

At the time when the author published the work *Bichos*, there was a concern for social commitment, which the author did not ignore. Through this “Noah’s Ark” (Torga, 1995, p. 7), albeit subtly and through symbolism, he aimed to convey an educational influence upon the reader. This concern is evident in the author, who appears to have lost hope in the present; and the work primarily represents a wager on the future: “Literally betting on the future is a beautiful game, but it is a game of those who have already resigned themselves to losing the present” (Torga, 1995, p. 8-9).

“Noah’s Ark” (Torga, 1995, p. 7), which, according to the Scriptures, preserved all species of animals from the fatal flood, is used by Torga in the political context of the New State (Estado Novo) to preserve values he considers essential (Sada, 2018), such as freedom. And the writer, in this vision of the future, does not intend to walk alone “like a stray wolf” (Torga, 1995, p. 9). This vow of solidarity, fraternity, and freedom is present in all the stories of *Bichos*, notable in the short story “Vicente”, a black crow who embodies the spirit of rebellion and revolt against a “lord” (Torga, 1995, p. 134). However, “Vicente” finds himself compelled to yield, as he realizes that everything is fruitless in the face of an unshakeable will. In the short story “Nero”, the theme of the meaning of life is also addressed, which is related to finitude, the universal reality of death, and the return to the *tellus mater*. The short story “Nero” also directs the reader to the individual importance of constructing a meaningful life, which involves defining goals and making choices based on responsibility and freedom.

The yearning for freedom, a desire to sever social bonds and forge ahead, is indeed implicit throughout *Bichos*, a work intended for readers. The author extends this invitation to the reader personally in the narrative’s preface, where he declares: “It’s time to welcome you to the gateway of my little “Noah’s Ark” (Torga, 1995, p. 7).

² Plano Nacional de Leitura (PNL). The PNL is a Portuguese national program whose mission is to develop the reading skills and habits of basic and secondary school students, so that they can better respond to the challenges associated with personal, professional, social, and cultural development.

The Death of Oneself and the Meaning of Life in “Nero’s” short story

The short story “Nero”, which opens the work *Bichos*, has a circular construction. It begins with the dying state of the partridge dog, which is acutely aware of the imminent end of its existence, and ultimately returns to that same moment, culminating in death. The contemplation of whole life entails considering not only its contents but also its limits and finitude (Azevedo, 2007; Kronman, 2007).

The narrative does not adhere to a linear chronological timeline. Instead, the life of the central character unfolds through flashbacks or analepsis between the initial state and the final state. It is through memories that Nero’s life episodes are recalled, revealing that the timelines of the past and the present run almost parallel. The past recalls various simple actions in the character’s life, but it is the present, marked by his dying state and subsequent death, that concludes the natural cycle of life. Life as a whole is a totality constrained by death (Azevedo, 2007; Kronman, 2007).

In the form of an autobiographical memory, the discursive level of the text consists of the Nero’s reflections. As he nears death, he engages in a retrospective narrative of his life, emphasizing his past vigor and joviality, contrasting it with his current physical decay and abandonment. This short story underscores the dichotomy between life and death and places these two realities in direct confrontation.

Nero’s memories are the way through which the most significant episodes of the protagonist’s life are recovered in the story. At the outset of the narrative, two temporal planes emerge: the present, already overshadowed by the death and physical decay of the dog, and the sense of abandonment that he experiences, and the past, filled with accounts of youthful adventures that showcase his vitality. The following passage is illustrative of this dynamic: “He was feeling worse and worse. He couldn’t even raise his head now. And so he let it rest gently upon the ground and remained like that, weakly stretched out, waiting” (Torga, 1950, p. 22). The current state of death contrasts sharply with other expressions of the character himself, which reveal his zest for life and allude to his past: “But Nero was a dog with dignity. Rabbits! They were the sport of mastiffs, of stray homeless curs and the rest. Neither he had he ever been a lap-dog” (“Era um cão que se respeitava, que tinha dignidade. Borgas dessas eram lá com rafeiros, com jecos do fado e do mundo”) (Torga, 1950, p. 29; Torga, 1995, p. 22)³.

The confrontation with the totality of life and the limit imposed by mortality makes it difficult yet also imperative to address the question of life’s meaning (Kronman, 2007; Routledge *et al.*, 2013; Tomer, 2012). Thus, near the end of his story, Nero constructs a life narrative in search of the meaning of his existence, ultimately leading him to the realization that his life was indeed worth living.

Meaning is central to human existence (Frankl, 2017). Viktor Frankl (2017) considers the will to find meaning as a primary and universal human motivation, arguing that the main goal in life is not pleasure or power, but the discovery of meaning and value in life.

³ The Portuguese-language quotation is also displayed because it does not have a perfect match with its English translation.

Meaning in life can be defined as the direction or purpose that an individual seeks, along with the subsequent subjective and dynamic evaluation of one's life as more or less meaningful (Schnell, 2021). A meaningful life corresponds to the fundamental belief that life is worth living and is grounded in the evaluation of one's life as coherent, significant, oriented, and belonging. This coherence involves a sense of comprehensibility and consistency, where one experiences that perceptions, actions, and goals make sense, leading to a coherent view of self and the world. Significance pertains to the perception of one's decisions and actions as having resonance and consequences. Orientation relates to the existence of a clear direction or purpose, and belonging involves perceiving oneself as part of a whole, having a place in the world (Schnell, 2021).

For Steger (2012), meaning is a network of connections, ways of understanding, and interpretations that help individuals understand their experiences and formulate plans, directing their energies toward realizing desired futures. Meaning in life encompasses the experience and reflection on contexts of meaning that are related to life (in general), personal life, or its various moments (Beike; Crone, 2012). However, the meaning of life generates a sense in individuals that their lives matter, that life makes sense, and that it is more than the sum of all past moments, their seconds, days, and years (Steger, 2012).

Individuals actively construct the meaning of their lives on a day-to-day basis (Kronman, 2007; Sommer; Baumeister; Stillman, 2012). Autobiographical memory (Beike; Crone, 2012) and nostalgia (Routledge *et al.*, 2013) are cognitive processes that facilitate the construction of meaning in life, the creation of a meaningful life narrative. It is through the recollection of remarkable autobiographical experiences (which serve as units of meaning in his life) at the moment of his death, during a state of pain and suffering, accompanied by nostalgia, that Nero constructs the narrative of the evolution of his identity, the story of his existence (Bluck; Habermas, 2000). Through this process, he finds the meaning of his life, and recognizes that life is worth living.

Throughout the story, the protagonist experiences several moments corresponding to his individual maturation process, including the journey, the change in maternal diet, the challenges of education, hunting, mating, and the education of his son. Nero's life truly begins to take shape when he finally acquires his own name, an identity, during the transfer of ownership. At that moment, the partridge dog starts to feel like someone's possession. The transfer of ownership immediately results in a transition from the mother's care to the caresses of the new owner, accompanied by growth due to the shift from the mother's food to that provided by the girl. However, this change of ownership is not without suffering for Nero's during the journey. Nero still vividly remembers the roughness of the road traveled during the journey, which marked his transition from dependence on the maternal nest to the new home. This journey also represented his separation from his mother and the beginning of his relationship with the maternal substitute (the young mistress), the beginning of his journey towards autonomy. The act of receiving a name represents another significant event in Nero's life, because, until then, he was just another dog, lacking a name and an identity:

The name had fastened itself to him when he arrived. Until then he had been nobody in the place where he had been born – a poor ungainly whelp, nameless, very fat and crazy, always glued to the dug the very end of his mother’s belly (...). When he was two months, he made that long journey full of fear, in the untender arms of a stranger. But when arriving he had basked in the warmth of the reception that the daughter had given him. (Torga, 1950, p. 25).

The reference to the “young mistress” foreshadows the significance she will hold for Nero throughout the narrative and highlights the importance of relationships with others and emotional bonds as sources of meaningful experiences and meaning in life (Hicks; King, 2009). She is the most loyal owner, the one who gives him with the most affection, and the last one to see him alive. Her presence symbolizes both welcome when Nero arrives and of farewell, when she visits him in his dying moments, shedding tears that reveal the inevitability of mourning, a product of their friendship.

The arrival of the “young master” provided Nero with confirmation that someone owned him, thus influencing his relationships within the household. However, the “young master”, who was described as “the son, a doctor, who lived a long way away” (Torga, 1950, p. 25), was merely his rightful owner. Nero’s true affection was reserved for the young master’s sister, despite considering himself as part of the family’s property.

The others only looked after him and gave him his food so that the doctor should have a dog when he came home. Nero, however, looked upon the three in the house as his masters, the old man and his wife and daughter; with these he had lived through the whole eight years of his life (...). What he really liked was the crystalline voice of his young mistress, the prodigal way the old women had with her and the old man’s horny hand. (Torga, 1950, p. 25).

One of the significant aspects in the evolution of the central character is the challenge he encounters while preparing for the hunting trip. Initially, his immaturity prevents him from realizing that the guidance provided is intended for his personal growth, preparing him for life and for his future work. He refers to these teachings as “the calvary of instruction” (Torga, 1950, p. 26).

In this first instance he ran after the handkerchief, thinking the whole thing was a game. Later, he saw that it was serious, that this game had another purpose.

“- Go and get it, Nero! Good boy!”

He acted as if he didn’t understand. And the other, after trying over and over again, tired of coaxing him, gave him a sharp cut with his stick. That was his first taste. (Torga, 1950, p. 26-27).

Nero’s first hunt, his initial foray into the occupation where he applied his acquired knowledge, provided him with previously unknown sensations of pleasure. It became one of the pivotal moments in his life. He attributed great significance to it himself:

It had been the first great moment of his life! It was after that, that the hills began to tell him things they had never told him before. He began to learn that along their spine on cold, calm mornings as the sun was rising, the nimble partridge would be pecking at the cokhsfoot. (Torga, 1950, p. 27).

Although Nero used to linger in the nest until late, the sensation of relishing the hunt overcame the morning's indolence. After this moment, the dog began to understand what was transpiring around him, along with the potentialities and resources that existed beyond the yard.

Beneath this excerpt of the short story lies a portrayal of the education of children in schools during the New State in Portugal, the period in which *Bichos* was published. Etymologically, the word educate originates from Latin, *educare*, which in turn derives from *e-ducere*, meaning to conduct or to lead. The education model in the Portuguese New State revolved around the authority of the teachers, the transmission of knowledge by them, and the memorization and repetition of learning content by students (Torga, 2018). The connection between knowledge and practical application was not emphasized (Torga, 2018), and the critical and creative capacity of children was not encouraged. School education, from the earliest ages, also aimed to instill moral values, and cultivate a spirit of submission, obedience, respect for authority figures and conformity to the established order, based on the trilogy of God, Nation, and Family. This is evident in the texts and phrases that were mandatory in reading manuals for “Elementary Primary Education” (now the First Cycle of Basic Education) (Portugal, 1932)⁴. Examples include: “To command is not to enslave; it is to lead.”; “The easier obedience is, the softer the command”; “Obey, and you will know how to command.”; “In the midst of noise nobody understands each other, that’s why in the revolution, nobody respects each other.” (Amado, 2007, p. 232; Coelho, 2015, p. 20-37; Portugal, 1932, p. 505-510).

It was also common practice in “Elementary Primary Education” to employ physical punishment, such as “the ruler of five eyes” (Torga, 2018, p. 31) and the stick/bamboo cane as a means to correct mistakes, discourage students’ inattention, and regulate behavior, which was legal and accepted by parents (Coelho, 2015). Nero considered these punishments unfair. Many children in Portuguese schools under the New State disliked school due to the severity of the teachers and the inflicted punishments (Coelho, 2015). Those with learning difficulties might have been particularly affected.

The ideological foundation of the New State is characterized by “economic, social and moral centralism, a rural ideal, anti-parliamentary democracy, anti-communism, limited schooling, and limited access to knowledge” (Carvalho, 1996, p. 728)⁵ It involved

⁴ Portugal, Ministry of Public Instruction, General Secretariat, Decree-Law n° 21:014, March 21, 1932. This Portuguese Decree-Law makes it mandatory to insert certain phrases in officially adopted reading books.

⁵ As Rómulo de Carvalho states: “The inconvenience of people knowing how to read was not in the fact of reading but in the potentially dangerous use it could lead to. Through reading, people would gain access to knowledge of corrosive doctrines and dubious faculties, as Alfredo Pimenta point out; and if this consequence was inevitable, then it might be better to close the schools, keeping them accessible only to well-behaved children of the bourgeoisie interested in preserving their privileges.” (Carvalho, 1996, p. 728).

the “inculcation of state values and control of minds”, which was primarily carried out through the school system (Coelho, 2015, p. 23). As Paulo Freire states:

When I speak of education as intervention, I am referring to both to that which aspires to radical changes in society, in the fields of economy, human relations, property, the right to work, access to land, education, healthcare, and to that which, on the contrary, reactionarily seeks to immobilize history and maintain the unjust order (Freire, 2002, p. 42).

The New State’s education policy fits into the latter category, as it aimed for conservatism, consolidating the prevailing ideology, molding minds, creating followers, and maintaining the stability of the regime and the closed society.

However, in contrast to the prevailing political ideology, Miguel Torga (1950, p. 27) argues that, as happened with Nero, it is through education and instruction that one can personally grow, that new horizons can be unveiled, and that doors can be opened beyond the backyard: “The hills began to tell him [Nero] things they had never told him before”.

In the existential context, the sense of belonging arises from the experience of finding one’s place in the world, being part of something greater than oneself, experiencing social inclusion, and establishing and maintaining relationships with others. People often describe interpersonal relationships as a significant source of meaning in life, including emotional connections with friends and family (Schnell, 2021). At least for some people, having a child is also a goal and another source of meaning in life (Schnell, 2021; Baumeister *et al.*, 2013). One of the most poignant moments in the narrative is the memory of the son, Jau. It represents the joy Nero once felt in having a son right by his side, nurturing and admiring him, even though the little guy inherited some of his mother’s traits: “But the little best had its mother’s bad points: not much of a nose and impatient in the following” (*Mas o raio herdara os defeitos da mãe: mau nariz e um pouco de sofreguidão*) (Torga, 1995, p. 23; Torga, 1950, p. 29) (see Footnote 5). The mentioned flaws lead to the son’s loss, as he does not adhere to the rules governing partridges during hunts. The act of giving Jau to a villager from Jurjais only deepens Nero’s sense of isolation and intensifies the loneliness that has taken hold of him.

The significance of the son becomes evident when, on his deathbed, Nero regrets not having a successor to “take his place in the corner” and inherit his nesting ground. These episodes, which Nero considered most important throughout his life’s retrospective, underline the contrast in the character’s past and present, symbolize the hero’s journey, and represent a process of individual maturation that culminates in the acceptance of mortality in the face of imminent death. Nero comes to recognize who he once was, how he has evolved, and becomes aware of the physical deterioration he has experienced, which places him in a state of decrepitude on the brink of his end. The theme of the irreversibility of life, the certainty of death, and the experience of loneliness in death are concepts that permeate the entire short story.

Nero, aware that he has nothing left to do and that his only task is to die, understands that he can no longer “dream of a beautiful burial” like so many he had

seen, with a yellow and white coffin, followed by everyone. That was only for humans [whether they are rich or poor]” (*Isso era só para gente, rica ou pobre*) (Torga, 1995, p. 11; Torga, 1950, p. 22) (see Footnote 5). The character realizes that his destiny won't have this grandeur, and that his final resting place will be “a sad burial place beneath the fig-tree in the garden. Their [dogs and cats of the house] cemetery was there” (Torga, 1950, p. 22). In this moment when Nero anticipates his death, there's the first - and perhaps the only - acknowledgment of a dog's inferiority compared to a human being. Yet, it's also a recognition that death is the great equalizer among humanity.

Near the end of the narrative, the reader witnesses the certainty of death and the anguish of realizing that it is even desired, considering the lamentable state in which the protagonist finds himself. Therefore, when evoking the past, there is also a great sense of nostalgia and some dissatisfaction:

Because, in spite of his blue blood, who was it that had barked at the wolves, at the fox and the weasel when they had brought fear and consternation on the hen-run? When all inside was suspense? He had. He, Nero, who was dying there, without a fang, with his bladder in blood, blind of one eye. And to think what he had been! Nimble, handsome, and the pride of his generation. Illusions of the world!

Indoors they were frying meat: he heard them clearly. In other times it would have been sufficient to make him slaver at the mouth and down his chin. Now, even the very memory of all that sent deep agonies down into the pit of his stomach. Decayed – all of him! They were frying meat, perhaps pieces of fat pork, browned and toasted. (...) Curse his life! And the rascally cock treading a hen. (Torga, 1950, p. 30).

In the short story “Nero”, the partridge dog is at the center of the story, perceiving the other characters through his own perspective and in relation to himself.⁶ He is a character who evolves throughout the narrative, with psychological density, and everything is narrated to the reader from his viewpoint or perspective.

For this reason, he assumes the role of an autodiegetic narrator, which means he is the “entity that conveys information derived from his own diegetic experience within the story; in other words, having lived the story as a character, the narrator draws upon this experience to construct his account” (Reis; Lopes, 2002, p. 257). Consequently, it is through this internal perspective that the past events are unveiled, the present is perceived, and that the characters are characterized, whether by alluding to their behavior or by explicitly referencing their attributes. The tragic view of the present and the nostalgia about the past are conveyed through the gaze of the main character.

⁶ The secondary characters (the young mistress, the young master, the hunter, and the son Jau) are valued or devalued according to the relationships they have established with Nero, the central character. They are flat characters, who do not evolve during the action, and their attributes are not explicitly stated through direct references but rather based on the significance that Nero assigns to them throughout the narrative. As for the other figures, they appear in the story only as supplementary elements that enrich the retrospective on the central character's life, thereby contributing to their characterization.

Only at the end of the short story, when no more memories were granted to the dog, does the textual author, assume the role of recounting the moments of happiness that Nero experiences, when he sees the “young mistress” mourning his death and watching him in his final moments. Such an account can only be observed from an external perspective, distinct from that of the character.-

Through the fringe of his eyelashes, he made out her face; she was crying. He let fall eyelids, content.

And at night, when the moonlight was flooding its fullness into the bare tiles of the house, and the hills of St. Dominic were beckoning to him from the distance, longing for them and delicate touch of his paws; When the scent of the last partridge had evaporated with him, when the cockerel began to herald the morning that was coming near, and when the picture of his small pup had vanished from his consciousness, Nero closed his eyes for the last time, and died. (Torga, 1950, p. 30-31).

After saying goodbye to everyone and seeing his “young mistress” cry, Nero ultimately passes away content, much like someone who harbors a desire to leave a lasting imprint on this world and to feel that they have been loved.

Without being anthropomorphized, the dog Nero is an animal that engages in introspective contemplations that form the foundation of the plot in this short story, which serves as a metaphor for what a happy human life can be: unpretentious and simple, yet remarkable and capable of eliciting joy.

As previously mentioned, *Bichos* is a bet on the future, as the author has lost hope in the present. In this anthology, each character also serves as a symbol: Nero transcends the role of a hunting dog obedient to his master and, from a social and political standpoint, represents the individual who, lacking freedom, and subject to imposed behavior, finds contentment in everyday life. From an individual perspective, even though his life followed a common path, it was filled with meaningful experiences: he possessed his own identity, a name, proved indispensable to his owner, fulfilled his duties, demonstrated competence, valued by all, earned the respect of others, and was loved. In essence, from Nero’s viewpoint, it was a life where relationships with held significance, goals were achieved, and it was a meaningful life worth living.

Nero’s death represents the tragic culmination of a life. As the dog approaches his end, he contemplates the question of life and death as two contrasting realities - the tragic view of the present and the nostalgic memory of the past. Yet, these contrasting realities complement each other because finitude is an inherent aspect of life.

Close to the moment of death, Nero contemplates lives the future of his final moments, seeking to find the meaning of his existence. Consequently, the moment of death can be seen as “the last moment of life, the indefinable instant of transition in which the entirety of life is assumed, accepted, and transformed [...]” (Azevedo, 2007, p. 434). Nero thus emerges as one who has discovered the meaning of life in this very moment.

The meaning of life is intricately linked to the meaning of death (Tomer, 2012). In his final moments, facing his own mortality and the impending end, Nero also seeks meaning in his death. As he discovers the meaning of life, Nero simultaneously imparts significance to what might have seemed devoid of it: chance, tragedy, and even his own death. The sense of belonging, the assurance that he was respected by all, his competence in fulfilling his responsibilities, and the achievement of his life's goals led him to the judgment that life had meaning and was worth living. This realization allowed him to accept death with less fear, finding some satisfaction, peace and emotional well-being in those moments (Tomer, 2012).-

Death, besides being an existential condition (it arises within the context of life and corresponds to the inevitable reality of its finiteness) is also an enigma, "the metaphysical vertigo of nothingness or, more so, the awareness of mystery, the dramatic intuition that it is the gap through which the infinite looms." (Azevedo, 2007, p. 425).

Nero accepts death with resignation, experiencing both anguish and, simultaneously, relief and liberation due to his pitiable state, physical limitations, and suffering (Tomer, 2012).

But, in this final moment, he also grapples with the anguish of non-being, the question of what will be afterward, the post-death, eternity – "I, who I am now, will soon cease to be (...) What will become of 'me' when I do not exist?" (Azevedo, 2007, p. 428). The body will be buried, like those of other domestic animals and that of the human being. Death is not depicted as an extinction, but as transformation into another level of existence, a return to *tellus mater, fons et origo*, a union with the Cosmos. It is therefore accepted as a process, the conclusion of a natural cycle, where nothing is extinguished, and everything is reintegrated in anticipation of a new rebirth.

Conclusion

Bichos can be considered a work of dual reception, ambivalent literature or crossover literature and is included in the Portuguese government's National Reading Plan for students in the 3rd cycle of basic education (from 12 to 14 years old).

Having chosen an animal so closely related to humans as the central character, Miguel Torga endowed it with human characteristics while still retaining the essence of the animal. The short story revolves around a common issue shared by both humans and animals: life and death. These contrasting realities complement each other, as life is inherently constrained by death.

Written in 1940, during the Portuguese dictatorship of the New State, the short story "Nero" focuses on existential questions of finitude and the meaning of life. The narrative does not adhere to a linear progression of chronological time. Through analepsis, the autodiegetic perspective of the partridge dog Nero, which means the narrative viewpoint from the protagonist, shifts to the past when he dies. Through autobiographical memory, Nero recovers and evaluates the most significant moments of his existence (units of meaning in his life), constructing his life narrative, and realizing that life was

worth living. Therefore, Nero draws the reader's attention to the value of life and its inevitable end, emphasizing the importance of creating a meaningful life. Therefore, Nero serves as a reminder to the reader about the value of life and its inevitable end, emphasizing the importance of creating a meaningful existence. In a country dominated by illiteracy (in 1930, 70% of the Portuguese were unable to read, were illiterate) (Mónica, 1977), the issue of education was also addressed by Miguel Torga, in the short story "Nero". Although education faced several problems during this period, such as teacher authoritarianism, a disconnect between curriculum content and real-life applications, and the use of physical punishment, the author emphasizes that education still plays a role in fostering personal growth, knowledge acquisition, and broadening horizons. This perspective stands in contrast to the ideology of the ruling class during the New State era, who regarded illiteracy and rural lifestyles (Mónica, 1977) as virtues that helped preserve the existing political and social order.

The meaning of life is interconnected with the meaning of death, and in his final moments of his life, Nero also searches for meaning in his death. Death is not regarded as extinction, but rather as a return to the *tellus mater*, where nothing is extinguished, and everything is reintegrated for a new rebirth.

For Torga, humans must be able to achieve self-realization in the world. They must unite with the earth, and remain faithful to it, so that life gains meaning, and the sacred itself finds expression. The land represents a concrete and natural place for humans. Life unfolds on earth and must be fulfilled there. The origin of life and time is rooted there. To the poet, the earth resembles a maternal womb. In his homeland, he discovered tenderness and suffering, the ordinary people with their joys and sorrows, their tranquility, and their effort. Torga's *telurism* is consistently expressed through his attachment to the land, which is made explicit in the spaces where his stories take place.

In the short story "Nero", allusions to hunting in the hills, to the lamp fig tree in the backyard, and to the chicken coop are not uncommon (although the physical space is underestimated in comparison to the psychological space). These references serve to uncover Nero's internal conflict between who once was and who he has become. Nevertheless, the entire narrative underscores that Nero's adventures and mishaps unfold in an environment where the land holds a pivotal significance, much like in other short stories by the same author.

The almost umbilical connection to the landscape of the village, the mountains, and the natal humus is realized through a process of experiencing and communing with nature, embracing its instinctive, sometimes violent, and even sacred aspects. Indeed, in Miguel Torga's works, nature can be considered a metaphor for the forces of the universe. The trees, the flowers, the wind, the rocks, the snow, the moon, and the sky, mentioned in this short story, are the elements that best convey, in Torga's fiction, these manifestations of universal life, spirit and the absolute.

A reflection remains to be made about the work *Bichos*. Among the fourteen short stories that comprise the work, nine end in death and five celebrate life. In Miguel Torga's writing, the themes of death and life carry underlying values. Fidelity, loyalty, honor, and justice are motivations present in all the short stories. Thus, it becomes apparent that

death, being the tragic condition of life, is linked to the concept of purification. Implicit in death is the desire for rebirth and the purification of the human condition.

SOARES, M. L. de C.; SOARES, M. J. de C. A morte de si mesmo e o sentido da vida em “Nero” de Miguel Torga. **Revista de Letras**, São Paulo, v. 63, n.1, p. 83-98, 2023.

- **RESUMO:** Neste artigo, seguindo-se o método hermenêutico, tem-se por objetivo a análise do conto “Nero” inserido na obra *Bichos* de Miguel Torga. Num primeiro momento, dá-se algum relevo às relações de implicação entre o homem, o meio e a obra em geral do Poeta de Trás-os-Montes (Portugal) que dá voz, através da escrita, à *tellus mater*. Num segundo momento, o foco deste trabalho, é a questão da finitude e do sentido da vida, que passa pela responsabilidade, pela liberdade, pela definição de objetivos e por escolhas pessoais
- **PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Sentido da vida; Morte; Conto; “Nero”; Miguel Torga; *Bichos*.

REFERENCES

AMADO, C. M. M. **História da pedagogia e da educação:** Guião para acompanhamento das aulas. Évora: Universidade de Évora, 2007.

AZEVEDO, M. C. Valores culminantes: Educação para a morte/ educação para a vida. In: BOAVIDA, J.; DUJO, A. G. del. (org.). **Teoria da educação:** Contributos ibéricos. Coimbra: Imprensa da Universidade de Coimbra, 2007. p. 417-446.

BAUMEISTER, R.; VOHS, K.; AAKER, J.; GARBINSKY, E. Some key differences between happy life and meaningful life. **The Journal of Positive Psychology**, Abingdon, v. 8, n. 6, p.505-516, ago. 2013.

BEIKE, D.; CRONE, T. Autobiographical memory and personal meaning: stable versus flexible meanings of remembered life experiences. In: WONG, P. T. P. (ed.). **The human quest for meaning:** theories, research, and applications. New York: Routledge, 2012. p. 315-334.

BLUCK, S.; HABERMAS, T. The life story schema. **Motivation and Emotion**, New York, v. 24, n. 2, p.121-147, jun. 2000.

CARVALHO, R. **História do ensino em Portugal.** Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1996.

COELHO, J. M. S. O ensino primário no Estado Novo português. **Aurora:** Revista de Arte, Mídia e Política, São Paulo, v. 8, n. 22, p.20-37, fev./maio 2015.

FEIJÓ, E. J. T. A geo-cultura dos contos de Miguel Torga e o seu progressivo desaparecimento: De *Bichos* a *Novos Contos da Montanha*. **Veredas**, Coimbra, v. 11, p.167-184, maio 2009.

FRANKL, V. **A falta de sentido na vida: psicoterapia para os nossos dias**. Lisboa: Editorial Pergaminho, 2017.

FREIRE, P. **Pedagogia da autonomia: saberes necessários à prática educativa**. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, 2002.

HICKS, J.; KING, L. Positive mood and social relatedness as information about meaning in life. **Journal of Positive Psychology**, Abingdon, v. 4, n. 6, p.471-482, nov. 2009.

LOPES, T. R. **Miguel Torga**. Oficinas a “um Deus de terra”. Porto: Edições Asa, 1993.

KRONMAN, A. **Education's end: Why our colleges and universities have given up on the meaning of life**. Binghamton, New York: Vail-Ballou Press, 2007.

MÓNICA, M. F. “Deve-se ensinar o povo a ler?”: a questão do analfabetismo. **Análise Social**, Lisboa, v. 13, n. 50, p.321-353, 1977.

MORIN, E. **L'Homme et la mort**. Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2002.

PORTUGAL. Ministério da Instrução Pública. Secretaria Geral. Decreto-Lei nº 21:014, de 21 de março de 1932. Torna obrigatória a inserção de determinados trechos nos livros de leitura adotados oficialmente. **Diário do Governo**, Lisboa, Série I, n. 68/1932, 1932. Available at: <https://dre.tretas.org/dre/2446197/decreto-21014-de-21-de-marco#anexos>. Access on: 21 mar. 2024.

REIS, C.; LOPES, A. C. M. **Dicionário de narratologia**. Coimbra: Almedina, 2002.

ROCHA, C. **Miguel Torga: fotobiografia**. Lisboa: Publicações Dom Quixote, 2000. Prefácio de Manuel Alegre.

ROUTLEDGE, C.; SEDIKIDES, C.; WILDSCHUT, T.; JUHL, J. Finding meaning in one's past: nostalgia as an existential resource. *In*: MARKMAN, K.; PROULX, T.; LINDBERG, M. (ed.). **The psychology of meaning**. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2013. p. 297-316.

SADA, R. C. R. **Um só ou muitos Bichos: uma “literatura menor” torquiana dentro do Estado Novo**. 2018. 107f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Letras) – Instituto de Letras, Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niterói, 2018.

SANTOS, J. C. Homens e Bichos: a questão do “humano” em alguns contos de Miguel Torga. *In*: FAGUNDES, F. C. (coord.). **“Sou um homem de granito”**: Miguel Torga e seu compromisso. Lisboa: Edições Salamandra, 1997. p. 125-146.

SCHNELL, T. **The Psychology of meaning in life**. London: Routledge: Taylor & Francis, 2021.

SEQUEIRA, M. C. Essa Estranha Condição de Poeta: “Bichos” de Miguel Torga. *In*: AAVV. (org.). **Actas do Primeiro Congresso Internacional sobre Miguel Torga**:

Aqui, Neste Lugar e Nesta Hora. Porto: Edições Universidade Fernando Pessoa, 1994. p. 97-106.

SILVA, S. R.. “Os bichos são homens e os homens são bichos”: Leituras de *Bichos*, de Miguel Torga. **Revista Portuguesa de Humanidades**: Estudos Literários, v. 12, n. 2, p. 193-200, 2008.

SOARES, M. L. C. Os *Bichos* de Miguel Torga: um dicionário da terra. *In*: ANES, M. A. (coord.). **Negrilho**: homenagem a Miguel Torga. Chaves: Alecrim & Alfazema, 2015. p. 293-303.

SOLER, E. L. De *Bichos* y otros animales (en la literatura catalana). *In*: AAVV. (org.). **Actas do Primeiro Congresso Internacional sobre Miguel Torga**: Aqui, Neste Lugar e Nesta Hora. Porto: Edições Universidade Fernando Pessoa, 1994. p. 263-275.

SOMMER, K.; BAUMEISTER, R.; STILLMAN, T. The construction of meaning from life events: empirical studies of personal narratives. *In*: WONG, P. T. P. (ed.) **The human quest for meaning**: theories, research, and applications. New York: Routledge, 2012. p. 297-313.

STEGER, M. Experiencing meaning in life: Optimal functioning at the nexus of spirituality, psychopathology, and wellbeing. *In*: WONG, P. T. P. (ed.). **The human quest for meaning**: theories, research, and applications. New York: Routledge, 2012. p. 165-184.

TOMER, A. Meaning and death attitudes. *In*: WONG, P. T. P. (ed.). **The human quest for meaning**: theories, research, and applications. New York: Routledge, 2012. p. 209-231.

TORGA, M. **Portugal**. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 2018.

TORGA, M. **Diário XII-XVI**. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 2011.

TORGA, M. **Bichos**. 19. ed. Coimbra: Ed. do autor, 1995.

TORGA, M. **Diário XV**. Coimbra: Ed. do autor, 1990.

TORGA, M. **Diário VII**. 3. ed. Coimbra: Ed. do autor, 1983.

TORGA, M. **Diário V a VIII**. 5. ed. Coimbra: Ed. do autor, 1951.

TORGA, M. The pointer. *In*: BRASS, D. **Farrusco**: the blackbird and other stories from the Portuguese. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1950. p. 22-31.