

LITERATURE AND SOCIAL ANALYSIS: MORTE E VIDA SEVERINA AS A REFERENCE FOR SOCIAL INTERPRETATION

LITERATURA E ANÁLISE SOCIAL: MORTE E VIDA SEVERINA COMO REFERÊNCIA DE INTERPRETAÇÃO SOCIOLÓGICA

LITERATURA Y ANÁLISIS SOCIAL: MUERTE Y VIDA SEVERINA CÓMO REFERENCIA DE INTERPRETACIÓN SOCIOLÓGICA

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ABSTRACT: Based on Gildo Marçal Brandão and Antonio Candido's ideas, this article intends to discuss the relations between literature and the social sciences as it explains how the literary text adds to scientific thought in social analysis. Morte e vida Severina poem is taken as a reference to demonstrate the relevance of literary narrative, even without all the scientific rigor, to the interpretation of social reality, likewise make it an intelligible discussion.

KEYWORDS: Literature. Sociology. Morte e vida severina.

RESUMO: *O presente artigo pretende abordar a relação entre a Literatura e as Ciências Sociais, tendo como base os pensamentos de Gildo Marçal Brandão e Antonio Candido, mostrando como o texto literário contribui para construção do pensamento científico em relação a análise social. Para exemplificar a relevância e tornar a discussão inteligível, este artigo buscou como referência o poema Morte e vida Severina e mostra como a narrativa literária é relevante diante da interpretação da realidade social, mesmo que ela não tenha o rigor do método científico.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: *Literatura. Sociologia. Morte e vida severina.*

RESUMEN: *El presente artículo pretende abordar una relación entre Literatura y Ciencias Sociales, basada en los pensamientos de Gildo Marçal Brandão y Antonio Candido, mostrando cómo el texto literario contribuye a la construcción de un pensamiento científico en un análisis social. Para ejemplificar una relevancia y hacer una discusión inteligible, este artículo busca como referencia o poema Morte e vida Severina y muestra cómo la narración literaria es relevante al interpretar la realidad social, incluso si no tiene el rigor del método científico.*

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Literatura. Sociologia. Muerte y vida severina.*

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Introduction

This article proposes to dialogue with Literature and Social Sciences. Using authors who thought about methodological issues of social analysis, this work sought in Gildo Marçal Brandão and Antonio Candido the references to relate the literary texts with the Social Sciences. Brandão (2007) states that the main theoretical instruments of analysis of the Brazilian social reality are in Brazil itself, he points out the need to read and interpret national thinkers that have tradition and relevance, in parallel, criticizes imported theories that are unable to read, interpret and identify Brazilian issues and specificities. In view of the national productions defended by Brandão, this analysis brings Candido's thinking that reflects on national Literature and its social and historical relevance, that is, it shows how the literary text is allied with the human sciences, even if it does not present scientific methods.

To make the reflection intelligible, this article brought as main example the poem *Morte e vida Severina* by the poet João Cabral de Melo Neto. The intention is to show how this work is in tune with the social reality, through the narrative of the poem that expresses the main social issues and problems in Northeast Brazil, above all, the relationship between the construction of the local narrative and its contribution to the construction of a Brazilian identity. By pointing out social problems linked to drought, it also shows how plural the Brazilian territory is and draws attention to an extremely diverse national unity.

Social reality and literature: the literary text as a reference

Brandão (2007) addresses the methodological issues related to the construction, analysis and interpretation of Brazilian political thought, saying that theory and reality must be aligned. In order to understand the reality and the social and political problems, it is necessary to consider the relevant academic-scientific productions that explain the dynamics and social movements constituted. Scientific theories are instruments of analysis, references and narratives that explain issues in which they were or are responsible for the current situation (BRANDÃO, 2007). This author discusses and collates the relationship between theoretical productions and the analyzed reality. He affirms that a theory that fails to explain reality correctly, is not able to work on its problems. Brandão (2007) criticizes and rejects any production that proposes “scientific” explanations based on utopian ideas. Studying social thought, as well as the most relevant productions, means understanding the trajectories and interpretations of these thoughts that are situated in a given time and space, that is, the previous readings and analyzes are the basis for understanding the social movements

constituted in contemporary times. "Despite the dated character of many of its theoretical propositions and empirical bases, the fact is that they continue to be read as witnesses of the past and as sources of problems, concepts, hypotheses and arguments for the scientific investigation of the present" (BRANDÃO, 2007, p. 234, our translation).

The Brazilian national territory is immense and rich in different socio-political realities that together are capable of expressing our identity. Schwarz (1994) says that to read the Brazilian reality it is necessary to use the national references of Brazilian thinkers and authors and not to import methods from other contexts to try, at all costs, to place them in a forced analysis. Moving external concepts to our reality and specificities can, as Brandão (2007) states, create utopias, precisely because of conclusions and considerations that are out of alignment with the object studied. Schwarz (1994) points out that it is necessary to include in the debate the theorists who proposed to explain Brazil, even if they did it wrongly based on the paradigms of the time, science does not start from scratch and refutations need to be grounded, respecting the theoretical frameworks.

In fact, if one of the peculiarities of the study of political thought is that it aspires to be a constituent part of the object studied, then, in examining its great works, the reference to those readings "must operate there as an element of control and, at several times, as a controversial dimension against the analyzes that seek to understand a coherent and original thought from its exterior" (BRANDÃO, 2007, p. 238, our translation).

Literature, properly speaking, is the "mirror of the social" because it reflects issues portrayed in its time, even if it does not have the scientific rigor, this artistic expression portrays the paradigms, thoughts and problems. Even though it is not deeply approached by Brandão and Schwarz, Literature is a relevant national production to deal with and discuss Brazilian problems.

In this sense, we can understand that Literature is one of the paths to understand the world, perceptible in the way it deals with the different aspects of man's life; one of these aspects is space, both fictitious and real. Through the actions and feelings of the fictional character, we can perceive the relationship between man and the place where he lives (PINHEIRO NETO, 2012, p. 325, our translation).

Literature, according to Candido (1993), does not have historical autonomy, precisely because it contains elements that are psychic, subjective and without method, although it expresses social elements. From the scientific methodological perspective, the literary text does not present a rigor in the expression of reality, however, "Literature opens objects that

support the scientific construction of knowledge” (PINHEIRO NETO, 2012, p. 326, our translation).

To be recognized as a literary work, it has to express the local reality in which it is inserted, as a relevant part of the national reality, even if it presents regional specificities (CANDIDO, 1993). The literary text, being inserted in a time and space, articulates paradigms that are in vogue at the time it was written, that is, it has a historical orientation, but also a social coherence. Literature is committed to expressing, even if not faithfully, a collective feeling, that is, common to people (CANDIDO, 1993). Therefore, even if it does not represent an autonomous reality, the literary text is capable of being an important reference for the reading of the constituted social movements.

Morte e Vida Severina is subtitled "*Auto de natal Pernambuco*" and goes back to the transposition of the birth of Christ to the mangroves of Recife, updating the genre and giving the auto a new aesthetic dimension. Far from dealing with religious themes, the poet is attached to the social and the political, denouncing the sores of the people of Pernambuco (PINHEIRO NETO, 2012, p. 320, our translation).

In light of what was previously mentioned, this article seeks to show the relevance of the work *Morte e vida severina*, by João Cabral de Melo Neto, in view of the reading of poverty and misery in the Northeast of Brazil, a fundamental piece to understand Brazil. Although the narrative of this poem develops in Pernambuco, João Cabral de Melo Neto portrayed the conditions of poverty and, above all, the Brazilian social problems. As previously mentioned, having as reference Candido (1993) and Pinheiro Neto (2012), *Morte e vida Severina*, even though it is a literary text, has the capacity to compose analyzes and interpretations of the issues that characterize the Brazilian identity, through a regional narrative present this poem.

***Morte e vida severina*: a social interpretation of poverty**

João Cabral de Melo Neto, the author of *Morte e Vida Severina*, was born in 1920 in the city of Recife - PE. According to Gaspar (2018), he lived his first years of life in the city of Moreno, along with sugar mills. A very recurring theme in his poetry is the Pernambuco landscape, in which he describes the sugarcane plantations. Melo Neto was always interested in reading - when younger - he read books for the workers of the mill that his family owned. In 1930 he attended high school at Ponte d' Uchoa School. His first publication was in 1940, entitled *Pedra do Sono* (Sleep Stone), about 340 books were produced (all paid for by

himself). In addition to literary production, he also worked at DASP in 1943, taking a public office. According to Gaspar (2018), it was at this time that Melo Neto had his first contacts with writers from Rio de Janeiro. Two years later, in 1945, he joined Itamaraty and started his career as a diplomat and retired in 1990. João Cabral de Melo Neto, according to Secchin (2014), belongs to the third generation of modernists or the generation of 45. His writings, although literary and poetic, they were rigorous and thorough, his fame was that of an “architect poet”. *Morte e Vida Severina (Auto de Natal Pernambucano)* was one of João Cabral de Melo Neto's most famous and award-winning works. It was written between 1954 and 1955 and published in 1956 with many reissues, more than sixty, according to Secchin (2014). The main characteristic of this work is the character of denunciation that the author makes the living conditions of the Northeasterner, showing the great relevance of the poem when the theme revolves around the poverty, drought and death that plagued the Northeast, especially the backlands of Pernambuco. The poem is divided into 18 sections, which show Severino's journey from the source of the Capibaribe River to the sea in the city of Recife (PINHEIRO NETO, 2012). “In this Pernambuco christmas auto, the protagonist Severino, in the image of the river, descends from the hinterland to the city, and the entire crossing is punctuated by encounters with death [...]” (SECCHIN, 2014, p. 36, our translation).

Melo Neto when telling the story of Severino, makes an unusual narrative, begins with death and ends by talking about life. The social content and the criticism of the author are in the presentation of problems related to the conditions of the Brazilian Northeast and the ailments experienced by the many “*severinos*” of that space.

And if we are *Severinos* equal in everything in life, we die of equal death, the same severe death: which is the death of dying of old age before thirty, of ambush before twenty, of hunger a little bit a day (of weakness and of disease is that the *severina* death attacks at any age, even unborn people) (MELO NETO, 2007, p. 92, our translation).

In this initial stanza of the poem, Melo Neto presents the death that is so present in Severino's daily life, but, above all, the way it affects the character, linking this narrative to the reality of the people who live in this social context. Apparently, for Severino, there is no other way out, there are no changes in life prospects amid drought and poverty. Within this analysis - Severino's thinking is almost deterministic in the sense of his destiny, in case he does not withdraw: early death.

Severino leaves for Recife. The story develops as the act of praying a rosary, in which, each bead would be a place where he passed - as the character himself said: “whose beads were villages”, that is, his way towards the final stop the mangroves of Recife-PE.

The inversion of the natural order (in this case, death and then life) appears not only in the plot, but also in the place within the poem. Severino leaving the Caatinga and heading towards the mangrove. Pinheiro Neto (2012) affirms that in the narrative “both man and river leave the interior of Pernambuco” punished by drought, only in the vicinity of the coast is there life and prosperity, stimulating Severino's migration.

From the point of view of environmental sciences, mangroves are a kind of cradles, where many species of animals go to breed. This leads to an assumption, Melo Neto, with his poetry all architected, organized the narrative showing water as something essential to life. Water is a fundamental element for maintaining life in the hinterland in which Severino is found in the first parts of the narrative, the lack of this resource generates a mortality of everything that exists, be it people, animals and even vegetation. Such scarcity and misery culminate in violence, also pointed out in the poem. This violence is portrayed in the passage entitled “Finds two men carrying a deceased in a hammock, shouting: ‘O brother of souls! I did not take the kill’”

And was that death dead, brothers of souls, was that death dead or was it killed? It was not dead, brothers of souls, this was death killed, in an ambush. And what did the ambush held, brothers of souls, and what did they kill him with, knife or bullet? This one was killed by a bullet, brother of souls, more guaranteed is a bullet, it pierces farther (MELO NETO, 2007, p. 94, our translation).

The poem narrates two people carrying a body of a person who was killed by a firearm projectile, precisely because of the possession of goods. Where everything is scarce, violence becomes present, all in the anxiety for survival. Where there is almost nothing, the little becomes of extreme value, even poor fields on stones.

In addition to the issues addressed by Sociology, the poem also encompasses a cultural perspective, this work deals with a fundamental issue within anthropology, the issue of death rites. Throughout the development of the narrative, Severino, in his walk, is faced with burials and also with a woman who makes a living praying at funerals. Severino asks several times about the possibility of employment in this region, which is still arid and dry. The woman says all the time that in this region, where she lives, there is no other profession than praying for the dead, including emphasizing that death is "a good deal". Although it is a poetic language with figures of speech, the relationship between a dead person and the act of

planting, illustrate well the similarity between Severino and the woman at the window. The death rite is essential for the survival of this woman. Both suffer from drought, both also know how to plant, but there, in that space, Severino's gardens do not thrive, because according to this woman, the "seed" that is "cultivated" and bears "fruit" is another.

As there is so much death here, it is only possible to work in those professions that make death a job or a bazaar. [...] Only the fields of death compensate here to cultivate and cultivating them is easy: simple matter of planting; you do not need to clean, fertilize or water; droughts and plagues make us prosper more; and it give immediate profit; you do not even have to wait for the harvest: you receive it right at the time of sowing (MELO NETO, 2007, p. 105-106, our translation).

Coming out of the drought, the protagonist finds the mangrove, which teems with life. In this new landscape, life reigns, supplanting death and giving hope for better days. The river has no other way out. It is, like the withdrawers who are looking for a better life, attracted by the same hope, fleeing the hardness that it lived at the beginning of the journey, there in the hinterland. Its fate is the sea, it knows that it needs to dig the land, trace paths, even if tortuous, to fulfill its destiny (PINHEIRO NETO, 2012, p. 335, our translation).

At the end of the poem, when Severino arrives at the mangrove and finds his José Mestre Carpina, he realizes that his expectations have not been met and that in the place where he hoped to find life and self-support, he finds nothing but the mud of the mangrove where he thinks of throwing himself and ending his life. The extreme poverty, the lack of material conditions and a perspective of life without possibilities for changes for the better, that is, "a life *severina*", makes the character Severino find no solution, once again death is the consolation capable of end suffering related to misery.

Mr. José, master carpina, what difference would it make if instead of continuing to take the best way out: to jump, one night, off the bridge and life? (MELO NETO, 2007, p. 123, our translation).

For Bispo (2009), the poem is beyond a narrative that portrays only the landscapes of the Brazilian Northeast, it symbolically shows the sores that exist in Brazil - all this, also marked by socioeconomic realities, social exclusion and underdevelopment.

Although the poem presents the issues of hunger and life's difficulties so sharply, Melo Neto still presents a "thread" of hope that he called life. The child, Carpina's son, is the product of the factory which, according to him, is also called "life" and which "stubbornly manufactures" (MELO NETO, 2007). It is made through generations and their descendants, in

whom hopes for a better life are placed, the child means the possibility of a different reality, perhaps less suffered, it is as if life is reinvented in each descendant.

Final considerations

In light of what has been exposed, this article aims to highlight the relationships between social reality and the narratives that are made by Literature. João Cabral de Melo Neto managed, through his poem, to draw attention to significant problems in Northeast Brazil, which are undoubtedly also social problems in other Brazilian regions. The poem is capable of showing a national narrative that is a fundamental piece to interpret social and cultural realities. *Morte e vida Severina* goes back to the local identity and contributes to the national identity (BRANDÃO, 2007). Severino represents a range of Brazilians who live without the prospect of a dignified and comfortable life and who often do not find a happy ending, differently from how is classic in literary works. João Cabral, faced with the interpretation of this analysis, tries to show this other side of Brazil, a tropical country, rich in resources and so miserable in regions, but above all the people who are dying of hunger.

My name is Severino, as I do not have another. As there are many Severinos, who is a pilgrimage saint, they gave me the name Severino de Maria (MELO NETO, 2007, our translation).

The author does not minimize the problems at any time, he shows the problem to the reader and makes him face these issues head on. Shows a Severino that could be anyone. A name common to all. A fate that no one in the hinterland would be free of - but above all, how the minimum conditions for survival are precarious. João Cabral de Melo Neto denounces in each verse of his poem how miserable people can be and how rich and hopeful they can be.

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