

THE INFLUENCE OF THE SERTÃO IN BRAZILIAN REGIONALIST LITERATURE

by

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(Under the Direction of Susan Canty Quinlan)

ABSTRACT

In this paper I will be dealing with regionalism in Brazilian literature, dealing primarily with one of its earliest manifestations – that of the literature of the sertão, an arid region in the Northeast of Brazil. I will discuss how regionalism fits into Brazilian literary history, as well as an analysis of the general characteristics of this region. I will argue that the sertão itself greatly influences the lives, and therefore the literature, of the local inhabitants. My discussion will focus on such things as the political and social structure, the influence of nature, and the importance of religion. To illustrate my points, I will discuss three novels pertaining to the sertão: O Auto da Compadecida, by playwright Ariano Suassuna; Vidas Secas, by Graciliano Ramos; and O Quinze, by Rachel de Queiroz. Although each of these works presents a different view of the region of the sertão, I will argue that there are many common themes which serve to prove that the region itself has a large influence on the style of the literature from that region.

INDEX WORDS: Brazilian literature, sertão, regionalism, Raquel de Queiroz, Ariano Suassuna, Graciliano Ramos

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CHAPTER 1

OVERVIEW OF THE SERTÃO AND BRAZILIAN REGIONALISM

In the Northeast of Brazil is a dry, arid region, prone to drought and with natural surroundings that lend itself to harsh living conditions. This area is called the sertão, and serves as the backdrop for some of Brazil's most famous literature dealing with social problems and inequalities. There are many recurring themes in works from this region, ranging from social and political protest to the strong ties between the people and the land, and the fragility with which these ties can be broken when nature turns hostile. In this study, I will first discuss the importance of regionalism of the 1930's and 40's in Brazilian literature, focusing on this particular area, then examine the various aspects of the culture and make-up of the *sertão*, and finally I will discuss three works which take place there – Ariano Suassuna's *O Auto da Compadecida* (1955), Graciliano Ramos's *Vidas Secas* (1938), and Rachel de Queiroz's *O Quinze* (1930). Although all three of these works paints a vivid picture of this region in Brazil, each has its own unique take on the area, and analyses specific aspects of the *cultura sertaneja*.

The term “regionalism” can be defined as “the use of regional characteristics, as of locale, custom, or speech, in literature or art” (“Regionalism”). In a basic sense, it means to pay homage to a particular area within a text, many times causing the region itself to become a character in the story. In effect, even though they may ultimately represent life in the same country, a narrative from one region can have a character and personality completely distinct from a tale of another area. As we will see in the

discussion of the readings, this is certainly the case in the literature of the *sertão*. Anyone familiar with Brazil would be able to instantly recognize, even without the aid of the names of cities, the region being represented in the stories I will discuss.

This literary trend began in Brazil in the first part of the twentieth century, in the thirties and forties, and in fact, much of the regionalist literature dealt with the *sertão*. In his article, “Crítica e contraste: uma releitura de o quinze,” Universidade de São Paulo professor Maurício Pedro da Silva discusses this facet of Brazilian literature:

A partir das décadas de trinta e quarenta, A Literatura Brasileira conheceu . . . a primeira grande corrente estética: . . . trata-se da literatura de temática regionalista, centrada sobretudo no Nordeste e que tem como principal motivação a *questão social*. A terra, a miséria, o povo sofrido e desesperançado seriam apenas alguns dos inúmeros temas abordados por essa vertente literária que, no afã de realizar um completo quadro social das nossas áreas não-urbanizadas, acabaram por legar à literatura nacional das obras de cunho verdadeiramente cosmopolita (230).

Here da Silva has already laid out one of the main points of a *literatura sertaneja* – that of social criticism and concerns. Each of the three works to be discussed here will in some way discuss this question.

There are a number of authors and works that are essential to address when dealing with the *sertão*. Although I will not be analyzing them in detail in this paper, it is important to mention these writings and their significance to *sertaneja* literature. Among the most well-known are Guimarães Rosa’s *Grande sertão: veredas* (1956), Euclides da

Cunha's *Os sertões* (1902), and the various writings of Gilberto Freyre which discuss the importance of the Northeast.

Guimarães Rosa's novel *Grande sertão: veredas* delves into the world of the *sertão*, and contains many ideas, or aphorisms, that will be very relevant to the works that I will be discussing later in this paper. He is particularly adept at showing how the *sertão* penetrates into those people who live in the region, in lines such as, "Sertão: é dentro da gente" (Alberto). The older child in Graciliano Ramos's *Vidas Secas* phrases this thought in his own way: "Naquele tempo [a seca] o mundo era ruim. Mas depois se consertara, para bem dizer as coisas ruins não tinham existido" (59). It is sentiments like these, that the *sertão* is an inherent part of everyone, which makes people continue to live there, and to return after being forced to leave due to economic or political reasons.

Os sertões is essentially the story of the War of Canudos of 1897, a fight between the government and a group of religious zealots led by Antônio Conselheiro. This particular group, fed up with the injustices they were suffering with the new political situation following the establishment of the new Brazilian Republic, decided to form their own society. We will see many instances in *a literatura sertaneja* where this mistrust appears; as mentioned in Rosa's story, "Quem desconfia, fica sábio" (Alberto).

A large portion of da Cunha's novel is devoted to an anthropological study of the people and geography of the region. In "Euclides da Cunha and the Sertão," Gilberto Freyre discusses Euclides da Cunha's achievement in this work, saying, "The prophet cried out in the wilderness of the *sertões* and gave them a Brazilian significance, beyond their meaning as landscape or undifferentiated humanity" (201).

One of the points made in *Os sertões* is the distinction between the Northeast and the other regions of Brazil, largely due to the great difference in climate:

Estas largas divisões mostram já uma diferença essencial entre o Sul e o Norte, absolutamente distintos pelo regime meteorológico, pela disposição da terra e pela transição variável entre o sertão e a costa. (Cunha 160)

The phrase “regime meteorológico” personifies the weather as a form of regime, a dictator who mandates life according to his own whims. This would certainly seem appropriate, since the inhabitants of the region have no control over the forces of nature, and their livelihoods are closely linked to their natural surroundings.

This lack of control over one’s own destiny can create in people a sense of hopelessness, or inevitability. In this way, many find themselves pulled towards the hope for a better life, even if it is after death. In a land where there is so much uncertainty, a strong, charismatic leader will easily find followers. As the critic Maria Zilda Ferreira Cury states, “Para Euclides, o clima excessivamente quente dos sertões geraria desequilibrados nervosos, formando uma sociedade primitiva que, cegamente, estaria propensa a seguir um líder fanático” (74). This indeed was the case in Canudos, in which, in a period of a few short years, the number of inhabitants grew to more than twenty-five thousand. This commune was made up of religious zealots who were discouraged with the injustices of the government and wished to live in an egalitarian community in which everyone helped each other. The ideas of the importance of religion and the dissatisfaction with the government and the strong idea of community will be common themes in the literature of the *sertão*, and will appear in the three works that I will be analyzing shortly.

In his article “O Homem e as Paisagens Rurais,” Gilberto Freyre makes mention of the people of the Northeast, and how the progressive industrial culture has drastically altered the quality of life in the region. He states, “Realmente é curioso notar como o homem rural . . . tem sido uma vítima do progresso . . . do ponto de vista de sua saúde, de sua alimentação, do seu vigor físico, de suas condições de vida material e moral” (Freyre, “O Homem”). We can apply this sentiment to the working class of the *sertão*, who frequently have their own rights and living conditions altered by the whims of those in charge of the production. In the region of which I will be speaking, the people in charge are the *patrões* of the *fazendas*, who think nothing of mistreating the workers in order to line their own pockets. This in turn leads to the workers becoming, as Freyre states, victims, suffering from poor nutrition and little material worth.

Before moving on to the texts themselves, it is important to be aware of the many facets of the *sertão* which will be incorporated in the works. These *tipos característicos*, or stereotypes, that I will be discussing range from the people themselves to the regional social and political institutions, as well as the strong impact of the natural world. The setting of the stories will also be an important point to discuss prior to analyzing the works.

There are three basic settings in the *sertão* which will be used in the regional literature. These are the *fazenda do interior*, the small towns which spring up to house and supply those living on the *fazendas*, and the large cities. The main industry of the *sertão* is based on livestock and the cultivation of sugar cane. It is the former industry that will be the setting of the works that I will be discussing. Therefore in this paper, the *fazendas* are large ranches, primarily for livestock. The livelihoods of many people are

tied up in the money brought in from the sale of these animals, and as one can imagine, a drought can be financially devastating.

The towns, generally rather small, are comprised of a number of small businesses, such as a bakery or a bar, and serve to cater to the needs of those living nearby. Also in these towns you will find the local Catholic church, a fundamental part of society, not only in the Northeast, but in all of Brazil. As we will see though, religion plays a very significant role in the lives of those of this region.

In much of the literature of the *sertão*, the large cities will not actually appear. Instead, they will be seen as a kind of utopia, a place where there are many jobs and plenty of money, where no one suffers the indignities and harsh realities that come with poverty. When the characters do actually arrive in the cities, what they usually find is another form of misery; instead of the paradise they envisioned, the characters find a lack of work and affordable housing, where prices are even more exorbitant and life is even more difficult.

Moving on to the inhabitants of the *sertão*, there are many different important vocabulary words used, each distinguishing a different social class or financial status. At the top of the social hierarchy is the *patrão*, the wealthy landowner who frequently finds himself in a position of relative ease, sitting back and watching others do all the work on the *fazenda*, the ranch or estate. The general perception of this figure is very negative – the cruel boss who exploits the workers and treats them unjustly, all because he knows that those who work for him cannot afford to lose their jobs, and therefore will quietly tolerate his treatment of them. The *patrão* represents the idle rich, flaunting their money and status as, in many cases, the virtual owner of the town near to the *fazenda*. In this

way, he also has enormous political influence; after all, the local constabulary knows on which side their bread is buttered, and will not go against the one who owns most of the land and capital, and who is most likely largely responsible for the money lining their own pockets.

Within the town, there are the various tradesmen – bakers, shop clerks, and the like. These merchants generally also fall into the same personification of greed as the *patrão*; in many cases, they are the only option available for their services, and therefore can charge what they wish, secure in the knowledge that the others will pay what they must rather than go without vital goods. Also in the towns we find the various persons in authority – on the religious side, we have the church officials, the priests and bishops; the local political authority is represented by the constabulary. Both of these groups show the corruption inherent to social institutions. The priests cater to the wealthy, granting special privileges and dispensations; the soldiers abuse their authority, making arrests for little or no reason, simply as a way to show the power they wield.

On the *fazendas* we find the *vaqueiros* and the *sertanejos*. These are the ones who work most closely with the land and the livestock. The difference between these two *tipos* is that the *vaqueiros* generally work on the ranches for the *patrão*, while the *sertanejos* will frequently own their own small farms, such as the family in José Américo de Almeida's *A Bagaceira* (1928). During difficult times, though, the independent farmers often find themselves forced to abandon their own land and go to work for others.

This unwilling desertion of one's own land often leads to another type of character – the *retirante*. These unfortunates, unable to find work anywhere within their

own community, leave on a long journey, searching for work. They will frequently head for the city, led on by the vague promises of work and stability. What often occurs is that, during the journey, they find themselves dying of hunger and exposure, begging at any homestead they come to for the food and water to keep their family alive for one more day.

Outside of the town and of the law we find the *cangaceiro*, an almost mythic figure at once a threat to the people of the *sertão* and an almost venerated figure. These bandits appear at homesteads and in towns, killing indiscriminately and stealing anything they can get their hands on. In his book *The Bandit King: Lampião of Brazil* (1978), author Billy Jaynes Chandler discusses the attraction of such stories as that of Brazil's most famous *cangaceiro*. He compares the popularity of these stories to those of outlaws from other nations:

Fascination with individual bandits and the creation of legends about them . . . have been so widespread as to suggest an element of universality . . .

Thus, Englishmen have long thrilled to hear stories of Robin Hood and his merry men, Americans recount the exploits of Jesse James, Mexicans tell of the raids of Pancho Villa, and Brazilians narrate the deeds of Lampião (Chandler 3).

By putting it into perspective like this, Chandler adds another dimension to the figure of the *cangaceiro* – by equating him to a figure like Robin Hood, we can see that, although in every sense a criminal, this *tipo* is a form of hero in the *sertão*.

Another statement from this book on Lampião shows us some of the motivation behind the acts of the *cangaceiro* – “They fell outside the law . . . only because of the

necessity of avenging wrongs done to them or their families” (Chandler 5). In effect, these bandits were acting out against an unjust social and political climate, and thus were heroes to those with little or no power. We see inside the mindset of a member of this *tipo* in Glauber Rocha’s film *Deus e o Diabo na Terra do Sol* (1964). The *cangaceiro* of this film, Corisco, justifies his cruelty as mercy. In his essay, “*Black God, White Devil: The Representation of History*,” Ismail Xavier notes, “[Corisco], when confronted with the greater indignity of death by starvation, chooses violence” (Xavier 142). Essentially, Corisco has decided that it is more humane to kill those who hunger, rather than allow them the shame of starving to death; an intriguing concept in a region where, during droughts, many face the reality of starvation.

The two main social institutions that we see caricaturized in the literature of this region are the Church and the local governing authority, generally represented by the police. In both cases, what we find are institutions which usurp authority and worry more about economic gains than about the people they minister to or govern. The inherent social criticism is that these bodies, which in theory serve to protect and foster everyone, end up catering primarily to the wealthy and powerful. I would like to make the distinction though, that in terms of the criticism of the Church, what is being ridiculed is not spiritual faith, but rather the institution itself. Religion plays a crucial part in the lives of the inhabitants of the *sertão*, but the local church officials themselves are frequently portrayed as avaricious and power-hungry. I will go into further details on Church criticisms in *O Auto da Compadecida*, and I will discuss the corruption in the police force in detail in the section on *Vidas Secas*.

As previously mentioned, this region is prone to harsh climatic conditions, and goes through periods of drought. One of the more famous, and devastating, droughts occurred in 1915, and will serve as the backdrop for the novel *O Quinze*. The journal *Aventuras na história* mentions the statistics for this time period:

Segundo o historiador Marco Antonio Villa, autor de *Vida e Morte no Sertão*, durante a seca de 1915 teriam morrido pelo menos 100 mil nordestinos. Outros 250 mil migraram para escapar da "velha do chapelão" - como a fome era conhecida no imaginário do semi-árido ("Nos campos de seca").

As we can see, the effects of this drought were devastating. Since the lives of the people are so closely linked to the land, as the main industry is farming, any significant change in the weather will drastically alter the lives of the inhabitants. As Vernaide Wanderley and Eugênia Menezes discuss in their book *Viagem ao sertão brasileiro* (1997), "Natureza e Homem . . . constituem uma totalidade inseparável, a relação é íntima, contínua e afetiva, necessária e universal, não se prendendo apenas ao aqui e ao agora" (11).

In addition to the meteorological elements, we also see nature entering through the animals that appear in the literature. Each of the three novels that I will be analyzing contains important animal characters, from the dog in *O Auto da Compadecida* to the cattle whose needs will virtually tear apart the family of Chico Bento. Since their livelihoods depend upon the cattle and other creatures of the *fazendas*, the farm workers show a great respect for the animals they care for, giving them names and going to great pains to ensure their well-being. We will see in some cases that this lends itself to the

animals being placed virtually on a par with their human caretakers; in some cases elevating the animals to almost-human stature, in others denigrating the humans to an almost animal-like state.

In order to better discuss the points that I have made thus far, I will now proceed to the analyses of the three aforementioned novels of the *sertão*. I will be discussing the works in and of themselves, focusing primarily on the way in which the region itself contributes to the narrative, using the general characteristics that I have just discussed. The first work that I discuss will be Ariano Suassuna's play, *O Auto da Compadecida*, which by its very nature and style presents a good overview of and introduction to the different stereotypical characters to be found in the *sertão*. These characters will contrast with those of the other two works, in that, as stereotypes, they do not have individual personalities and do not put a truly human face on the inhabitants of the region. I will then move on to what is perhaps one of the most classic examples of a *literatura sertaneja*, Graciliano Ramos's *Vidas Secas*, which presents a vivid portrait of the life of a *retirante*, a fate shared by many of the region's inhabitants. As a means of contrast, at least in part, I will end my analysis with Rachel de Queiroz's *O Quinze*, which presents a different version of one of the *tipos característicos* – that of the *patrão*. Finally, I will end with some general remarks on the similarities in style among the three works, owing to the great influence that this region on Brazil has on those that live there, and therefore also on the literature produced.

CHAPTER 2

O AUTO DA COMPADECIDA

THE SERTÃO AS SETTING FOR A MODERN MORALITY PLAY

In 1956, the first production of Ariano Suassuna's play *O Auto da Compadecida* was performed in Recife. This work was a modern take on an old theatrical style – that of the morality play. Themes inherent to this form of theatre, such as the conflict between good and evil and the way in which worldly preoccupations can cause corruption, appear in this work, but in a contemporary Brazilian setting, set against the backdrop of the *sertão*. Due to the social and political aspects of the region previously discussed, and which will be elaborated upon in this section, the *sertão* region lends itself well to the reinvention of a classic theatrical method.

The literary critic Dillwyn Ratcliffe writes about the style of this play, stating that what Suassuna does is “restat[e], in Brazilian terms, themes, concepts, and attitudes reminiscent of the literature of protest in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance” (282). These “themes, concepts, and attitudes” of which Ratcliffe speaks are those of pointing out sin and vice, the main goal of the traditional morality play.

A Portuguese-language example of a play of this genre from the sixteenth century is *O Auto da Barca do Inferno*, by Gil Vicente. In it, we meet a series of characters that represent particular facets of society – the corrupt church official, the superficial lord, the avaricious moneylender, and the like. Each character embodied a particular type of person, readily recognizable to the audience (in some cases, those being personified were

actual, specific individuals). As each of these characters, weighed down by their mundane and selfish preoccupations, is rejected from the boat to salvation in turn, the audience learns the message that only those who are virtuous and fight for the glory of God will be saved.

Likewise, *O Auto da Compadecida* deals with the vices of society and the ultimate decision of which souls are worthy of being saved. We will see examples both of the vices associated with a particular office, such as the corrupt bishop and priest, as well as the chasm which exists between the rich and the poor members of society. An important difference that will be seen between this work and medieval examples of this genre, is that, unlike the clear-cut, black-and-white, Heaven or Hell verdicts rendered in the morality plays of old, here we see a more modern take, in which exist varying shades of grey. Also, in *O Auto da Compadecida* the author will introduce the significance of the sertão and the way in which it influences the lives of the sertanejos to such an extent that it in turn becomes a part of the trial of salvation. In essence, the *sertão* itself becomes a character. Early morality plays could be applied to any location within a Christian society; *O Auto da Compadecida* very clearly takes place in the Northeast of Brazil.

This play employs a number of recognizable *tipos sertanejos* as characters. In this way, Suassuna uses a stylistic technique from the morality play – the use of archetypical figures to convey his meaning and show his criticisms. What he does is to represent larger groups by using figures common to the sertão. For instance, to discuss the idleness and unjust social elevation of the upper class, Suassuna creates the character of a rich *fazendeiro* in the guise of Major Antônio Morais. Along with Morais, we see

many other *tipos sertanejos*. Chicó is the poor man who passes his days telling fantastic stories to anyone who will listen. Severino and his assistant are *cangaceiros* in the style of Lampião, the almost mythical figures of the region, both feared and respected by the people. João Grilo could be any poor person who has learned to survive by his wits in a land at times very hostile. All of these characters have a very recognizable aspect within the world of the *sertão*, but they themselves, like the characters in early morality plays, do not have much of a personality, being used rather as a means to bring to light problems in society. As the critic Ligia Vassallo states in her book *O sertão medieval* (1993), “Seu teatro épico e religioso retoma, portanto, o *modus faciendi* medieval através da cultura popular nordestina que o embasa” (164).

From early on in *O Auto da Compadecida*, we can see how the *sertão* affects the people of the region. In a conversation between two of the characters, João Grilo and Chicó, Chicó mentions how he has heard of a woman who “had” a horse, in other words, who had given birth to a horse. João Grilo, rather than being surprised, responds, “Isso é coisa de seca. Acaba nisso, essa fome: ninguém pode ter menino e haja cavalo no mundo. A comida é mais barata e é coisa que se pode vender” (Suassuna 27). Although a ridiculous idea, a woman giving birth to a horse, the rationalization is clear – it is cheaper to raise a horse than a child, and when all is said and done, a horse is more valuable, as it can be sold for profit. In an area in which, for the poor, food and clothing can be very scarce, this would certainly appear to be a logical conclusion.

Later on, almost at the end of the play, we see another reference to the harsh life of the *sertão* and the affects it has on the spirit of the people. The character in question at this point is João Grilo, who spends most of his time tricking people in order to get what

he wants. He has a knack of discovering people's vices and using them to his advantage. For instance, he has learned the secret to getting around the Baker's Wife – "Eu não lhe disse que a fraqueza da mulher do patrão era bicho e dinheiro?" (88). Knowing this, João Grilo decides to make some money off of the Wife, selling her a special cat, one that "descome dinheiro" (88). There is of course nothing special about this cat, except that João has manipulated it in order to make it appear to "descomer" money. However, he convinces the Baker and his Wife that this cat is valuable, and they eagerly pay to own it. In addition to the money he receives, João Grilo also takes great pleasure in tricking these people who believe themselves to be his superiors. This shameless love of trickery will ultimately be his downfall, in that it leads both to his death and to his potential spiritual condemnation.

During this final judgment scene, when João Grilo is about to be condemned to eternal damnation, the Compadecida, the Virgin Mary, intercedes on his behalf. She argues that he acted the way that he did on Earth because his living situation forced him to have to learn to survive by whatever means necessary. As she says, arguing before Manuel, who represents Christ, "João foi um pobre como nós . . . Teve que suportar as maiores dificuldades, numa terra seca e pobre como a nossa" (184). For this reason, his love of tricking others and inventing stories was merely his way of surviving the harsh realities of life in the sertão.

Returning to the theme of the class struggles inherent in this work, we see the social strata that are so prevalent in this particular community. Due to the *fazenda* system of the economy, as previously discussed in the introduction of this paper, the wealthy landowners enjoy the luxuries of a relatively easy life, while the hard-working labor class

finds itself remaining at the bottom of the social hierarchy. We can see Suassuna's criticism of the landed gentry through his portrayal of the character of Major Antônio Morais, particularly in the way he interacts with characters like João Grilo and the Padre. In the first interaction between Morais and João Grilo, João is trying to cover up one of his famous bits of trickery by telling the Major that the Padre has gone crazy, blessing his *patrão* (supposedly the Baker) and calling him a dog. The major responds with contempt, saying, "Isso foi porque era com seu patrão. Comigo é diferente" (41). There are some clues that support the idea that the Baker should be one of the wealthier people within the village; he is the president of the *irmandade* that supports the Church financially, and also personally donated a cow to the Church to provide milk for the Padre. However, even with all that, he still is nowhere near being on a par with Major Antônio Morais, the man who owns the *fazenda* near the town, and whose money and land most likely are the main support of the people living there. The Baker therefore is not such an important personage, and it is ridiculous to think that the Padre would treat the Major in the same way.

The criticism of the wealthy becomes more severe during the exchange between the Major and the Padre inside the church. The Padre, upon greeting the Major, makes small talk by saying that it has been a long time since the Major has been to church, making the excuses that he knows that Major is very busy and must take care of his health. The Major responds to this with scorn, replying,

Ocupações? O senhor sabe muito bem que não trabalho e que minha saúde é perfeita... Os donos de terra é que perderam hoje em dia o senso de sua autoridade. Vêem-se senhores trabalhando em suas terras como

qualquer foreiro. Mas comigo, as coisas são como antigamente, a velha ociosidade senhorial (43-44).

This idleness to which the Major refers shows the unfair nature of this economy – those who do little or no work are the ones who end up having everything.

This lack of concern for the church is interesting, in that it shows another difference between the wealthy (as represented by the Major) and the poor – that of the importance of religion. When one's life is so harsh, with little or no hope of bettering one's situation, one's faith becomes a very significant force in one's life. One character that illustrates this dependence on faith is the Baker's Wife and her concern for the welfare of her beloved dog. The play opens with Chicó, who works for the Baker, going to the Padre to ask him to bless the Wife's dog, who is dangerously ill. She herself enters in the scene later on, begging for the blessing – “. . . pelo amor de Deus, meu cachorro está morrendo. É o filho que eu conheço neste mundo, padre. Não deixe que o cachorrinho morrer, padre” (51). She truly believes that as long as the dog receives this blessing, that he will recover.

On the other hand, as we have already seen, the Major does not have much, if any, respect for the church. The only reason he is there is to obtain a blessing for his youngest son, who is sick, and who has asked to be blessed before leaving for Recife to recover. However, since by his own admission the Major is in perfect health and does not know what it is to suffer to earn a living, he does not have the same spiritual needs. His attitude and contempt towards the Padre shows that, since for him life is so good, he does not feel any need to attend mass. I would not necessarily conclude from this that Church is only

significant for the poor, merely that it is those without power or hope in life who are more driven to seeking solace in their faith.

Suassuna also questions the respectability of the church, although not of the religion or faith itself; rather, he criticizes the practices of church officials. The Padre is asked by Chicó and João Grilo to give his blessings to a dog. Initially, he is furious, saying that the idea is simply unheard of and that there is no way he will even consider such a request. When pressed about why he felt that it was all right to bless a *motor* (which just happened to belong to a very wealthy man), he replies, “Motor é diferente, é uma coisa que todo mundo benze. Cachorro é que nunca ouvi falar” (32). However, once he is led to believe that the dog belongs to this wealthy man, his attitude completely changes. As João Grilo comments to Chicó, “Não viu a diferença? Antes era ‘Que maluquice, que besteira!’, agora ‘Não vejo nada mal em se abençoar as criaturas de Deus!’” (35). Apparently the degree of ridiculousness changes depending on who is making the bizarre request.

Once the dog has passed away, the Wife asks the Padre to bury the creature, giving it a full Christian funeral. Again, now knowing the true owner of the dog, the Padre refuses, supported in this decision by the other church officials, the Bishop and the Sacristan. However, we once again see how this priest’s values vary in the face of monetary gain. João Grilo invents a story about how the dog left a will in which he left money for the various officials – “Sim, o cachorro tinha um testamento. Maluquice de sua dona. Deixou três contos de réis para o sacristão, quarto para a paróquia e seis para o diocese” (85). The Sacristan, perhaps more interested in the money and less afraid of the Bishop than the Padre, justifies the burial of a dog in this way:

Não se trata de nenhum sacrilégio. Vamos enterrar uma pessoa altamente estimável, nobre, e generosa, satisfazendo, ao mesmo tempo, duas outras pessoas altamente estimáveis, nobres, e, sobretudo, *generosas* [italics mine] (68).

Suassuna makes it clear that these members of the clergy are more interested in lining their own pockets and protecting their own economic interests than in the moral duties of their office.

The character of Severino and the way in which he is portrayed by the author are significant in that, through him, we see the shades of grey earlier alluded to in terms of eternal salvation. First and foremost, however, Severino, in his role as *cangaceiro*, represents the outlaw, a lawless villain who has come to rob the city and to kill those who get in his way. In a strange way, he is much like the Major. Neither of these men has respect for humanity, except as a means to riches. Both, in their own ways, rob from those unable to defend themselves without any crisis of conscience. The difference is that while the Major satisfies himself with exploiting workers, a type of “legal” injustice, Severino lives outside of the law, taking what he wants by force. He has no scruples or qualms about killing; not even the clergy are safe from him. As he says when he enters the church to kill those seeking refuge there, “Ótimo. Nunca tinha matado um bispo, o senhor vai ser o primeiro” (107).

However, we see a different perspective of Severino and his life when we arrive at the Judgment scene at the end of the play. Of all the characters in the play, Severino and his companion are probably the ones most obviously marked for eternal suffering. Instead, Manuel intervenes for them, and states that their souls will be saved. The reason

– the two of them “foram meros instrumentos de sua cólera [de Deus]. Enlouqueceram ambos, depois que a polícia matou a família deles e não eram responsáveis por seus atos” (180). What this tells us is that it is not merely the individual who is responsible for the way in which he or she behaves; society also plays a critical role. As Chandler states, “The view that the cangaço was an understandable – though deplorable –reaction to the poverty and lack of justice in the northeastern backlands served to set the bandits apart from ordinary outlaws in the popular mind” (5). In a society in which there is such a dichotomy between the Haves and the Have Nots, in which violence so often begets violence, it should not be surprising that some individuals turn out violent, and that society in general needs to take some responsibility for that fact.

The judgment of Severino and his companion are not the only ones that show a deviation from the traditional morality play. In the traditional play, a person is either condemned or saved, and is responsible for their own actions during life. Suassuna brings his play into the twentieth century, looking at the motivations behind actions as justifications, and creating a distinctly grey area between Good and Evil that was not considered in the Middle Ages. In this way, he gets rid of the duality that was an essential part of morality theatre, and creates a work more accessible to a modern audience. In this particular judgment scene, two characters, as previously mentioned, are saved and go to Heaven. The majority of the others are sent to Purgatory to atone for their various sins. This gives the audience a sense of hope, that while sinning is practically inevitable, particularly in an inhospitable area like the *sertão*, there is still a chance that one will not be condemned for all Eternity.

The *sertão*, in which the uncertainty of life causes religious fervor in many people, as well as a high level of social injustice, creates an appropriate scenario for an updated, modern version of an old theatrical style. This region lends itself well to the kind of social commentaries that were a crucial part of these plays, such as the corruption of the clergy and the ruthlessness and mundane preoccupations of the upper class.

Although it may be possible to set such a work against the backdrop of other areas, none would perhaps have the same impact or such a diversity of recognizable characters as the *sertão*, showing the importance of this region in Brazilian literature.

CHAPTER 3

VIDAS SECAS

THE DEHUMANIZATION OF THE WORKER AND THE STRUGGLE FOR POWER

One of the most well-known novels in Brazilian literature is Graciliano Ramos's *Vidas Secas*. In this story, we follow the lives of Fabiano and his family during a severe drought in the *sertão*. The life of the members of this family is very harsh, due to the unstable climate and the lack of opportunities for work in this region, and throughout the novel, we will see how the *sertão* has a profound effect on the lives and personalities of the inhabitants of this area. A central theme of this work is that of dehumanization, which enters and penetrates the lives of the poor as a predominant force, shown through the various characters as well as the language used by the author.

In the Brazilian *sertão*, as previously discussed, any change of seasons has a significant effect on the workers and farmers of the region. The arrival of a drought causes a complete change in the living situation of those who work on small farms or on the *fazendas*. They are forced to leave their homes, looking for whatever work they can find, often at unreasonably low wages, just to be able to support themselves and their families. It is a very difficult time for them, but good for the landowners and members of the upper-class who are able to take advantage of the situation and exploit those who cannot afford to turn down any wage. Since so many people are competing for a very limited number of jobs, the *fazendeiros* do not feel obliged to treat their employees fairly, since there are always others to replace them.

In her article “O protesto social na obra de Graciliano Ramos,” Maria Isabel Abreu cites a statement by Arturo Torres-Rioseco, which discusses the moral values in Ramos’s work. He states that, “a lei natural atua de forma absoluta e, portanto, o homem não é bom nem mau” (Abreu 850). In other words, a person is obligated to follow natural law, because there is no way to avoid it, particularly in such desperate and competitive situations. For this reason, a person is not truly guilty if they are forced to act in a way that causes harm to others. This person has not done anything either good or evil, because everything, according to this natural law, is acceptable if the end result is survival. Of course, the reader of this novel feels more sympathetic towards Fabiano and his family, who would be acting out in order to survive, than towards characters like the *patrão*, who hurt others simply because they can.

Later on in this same article, Abreu discusses the relationship between man and the world:

O homem está só, abandonado, perdido na natureza, elemento hostil. A natureza, porém, não está só, tem seus aliados: o patrão cruel, símbolo da exploração iníqua, e o soldado amarelo, representação da autoridade injusta. É inútil lutar (852).

What this statement does is draw a direct parallel between the hostile natural aspects of the *sertão* and the equally hostile characters of the *patrão* and the *soldado amarelo*. Just as it is impossible to fight against the forces of nature, against drought and the harsh sun, so too will Fabiano discover that it is useless to try to fight against the oppressions he finds in those in authority. As Guimarães Rosa comments, “Sertão. O senhor sabe : sertão 'onde manda quem é forte , com as astúcias” (Alberto).

Fabiano, a poor man accustomed to having to work on other's farms in order to earn enough money to feed his family, has learned that, in order to keep what he has, he cannot afford to rebel against the system. As Ramos describes him, "Fabiano sempre havia obedecido. Tinha muque e substância, mas pensava pouco, desejava pouco e obedecia . . . tinha imaginação fraca e não sabia mentir" (Ramos 28-29). He lacks the know-how and the courage to stand up for himself, even in the face of the most blatant injustices. His need to obey and his lack of ability to confront his oppressors is so great that, even when given the opportunity to avenge himself on those who have wronged him, he finds himself unable to comply, as I will discuss further later.

One of the main themes in this novel is that of the dehumanization of Fabiano and his family. This becomes clear through his interactions with other people, particularly with the two primary authority figures in the novel – the *soldado amarelo* and the *patrão*. Both abuse their positions in order to exploit others, and Fabiano, in his dealings with them, finds himself being driven further and further into a world in which he ranks lower than the animals.

The *soldado amarelo* represents the corrupt legal authority of the area. We first meet him when Fabiano is in town making some purchases. He invites Fabiano to join in a card game, and then when Fabiano tries to leave, the soldier follows him, provoking him until Fabiano is forced to try to defend himself, giving the *soldado amarelo* an excuse to throw him in jail overnight:

O outro continuou a pisar com força. Fabiano impacientou-se e xingou a mãe dele. Aí o amarelo apitou, e em poucos minutos o destacamento da cidade rodeava o jatobá (31).

To this *soldado*, Fabiano, being a poor worker with no political power, has no value whatsoever, and therefore may be treated with contempt and injustice. For Fabiano's part, he has internalized the idea that political power is unquestionable – “Governo, coisa distante e perfeita, não podia errar” (33).

Later on in the story, as he is out hunting, Fabiano comes across the *soldado* unexpectedly, and finds himself up against an unarmed enemy. In this situation, Fabiano clearly has the upper hand; even the soldier recognizes this – “encolhia-se, escondia-se por detrás da árvore” (104). This feeble attempt at hiding shows just how weak the *soldado* really is, that his only real power comes from the office he holds. Fabiano enjoys the irony of the situation, thinking to himself,

. . . isto lhe pareceu tão absurdo que se pôs a rir. Medo daquilo? Nunca vira uma pessoa tremer assim. Cachorro. Ele não era dunga da cidade? não pisava os pés dos matutos, na feira? Sem-vergonha, mofino (103).

For several minutes, Fabiano ponders this opportunity that Fate has given him, thinking that killing this enemy would in some way make him more of a man. However, as we discover, he does not in fact possess the ability to rise up against the other; the mere fact that the *soldado* represents the local authority is enough to stay Fabiano's hand. Instead of killing an enemy (which the natural law would state he has every right to do), he backs down, showing courtesy to this *soldado amarelo* –

- Governo é governo.

Tirou o chapéu de couro, curvou-se e ensinou o caminho ao soldado amarelo (107).

In spite of all the cruelty he has been shown by this *soldado*, Fabiano finds that he is only capable of treating this man with the respect that he has been trained to show those in a higher social and political position.

Another person with whom Fabiano is forced to interact is the *patrão*, the wealthy landowner for whom he works. We can see through his interaction with the *patrão* that Fabiano ranks as something rather less than human, a creature not worthy of the most basic level of respect. He sees himself as such – “uma rês na fazenda alheia” (24). However, to be strictly accurate, it is unfair to state that in the *patrão*’s eyes, Fabiano is on a par with the animals. The fact is, Fabiano is actually worth *less* to the *patrão* than any of the animals he cares for. The cattle on the *fazenda* represent money to their owner, while Fabiano is merely a laborer, who, as Ramos remarks, “seria despedido quando menos esperasse” (23). This in fact occurs towards the end of the novel, when Fabiano goes to complain about being paid less than he was due. He is dismissed from his job - “O patrão zangou-se, repeliu a insolência, achou bom que o vaqueiro fosse procurar serviço noutra fazenda” (94). By daring to speak out against his boss, Fabiano has forfeited his only way of earning a living; and like anything that has outlived its usefulness, he will be replaced by someone new.

The many hardships encountered by the *sertanejos* during times of drought, as we have seen, conspire to create an atmosphere in which those with money and power feel that they can take advantage of those who lack the ability to fight against injustice. What results is that people like Fabiano and his family find themselves virtually on a par with the livestock raised on these *fazendas* – dumb animals who have no control over their lives and are subject to the will of those who own them. In this way, we can see how

nature, that is, the natural world, also plays an important role in the lives of the people of this novel, in the obvious way of the drought being the cause of many of their problems, but also putting other creatures on a level with the human characters.

There are many instances in which we can see the close relationship between these people and the natural world. One example occurs early in the story, when Fabiano and his family, traveling through the barren desert, are forced to eat their pet parrot in order to survive. The language that Ramos uses here is very interesting. One can feel that the family truly regretted having to consume what was really a member of the family – “Coitado, morrerá na areia do rio...a fome apertará demais os retirantes e por ali não existia sinal de comida” (11). In a later chapter, we see Fabiano’s wife, Sinhá Vitória also lamenting the loss, thinking to herself, “Coitado...Pobre do louro. Na beira do rio matara-o por necessidade, para sustento da família” (43).

However, although she later feels sad for having killed and cooked the bird, she initially feels the need to justify her actions, saying that the parrot was of little use – “Resolvera de supetão aproveitá-lo como alimento e justificara-se declarando a si mesma que ele era muda e inútil” (11-12). This sentiment is rather ironic, in that no one in this family really talks very much. In the chapter dealing with the older child, we see a comparison between him and the parrot – “Tinha um vocabulário quase tão minguado como o do papagaio” (57). The reason why the parrot only spoke one phrase was because it did not have the opportunity to hear much speech. In fact, it appears that this bird was virtually the only being communicating at all during the journey, and once he died, the others “viviam todos calados, raramente soltavam palavras curtas” (12). In

effect, in many ways, the non-human characters of the story, the parrot, like the dog, are more human than Fabiano, Sinhá Vitória, and their two sons.

The dog plays an interesting role in the novel. She carries an unusual name for a creature living in the desert – Baleia, or whale. Perhaps the family, in giving her this name, was thinking of an ideal place, where drought and famine are not a part of life. It is also important to note that the dog is named, while the two children are only referred to as the *Menino mais novo* and the *Menino mais velho*, yet another example in which the animals seem more human and more characterized than the people.

Baleia is like a third child to Fabiano and Sinhá Vitória, and interacts with the two sons as such – “brincavam juntos os três, para bem dizer não se diferenciavam (86).” Not only does the dog provide company, she also makes herself useful during these hard times, as we see in this excerpt from the first chapter:

Iam-se amodorrando e foram despertados por Baleia, que trazia nos dentes um preá. Levantaram-se todos gritando. O menino mais velho esfregou as pálpebras, afastando pedaços de sonho. Sinhá Vitória beijava o focinho de Baleia, e como o focinho estava ensangüentado, lambia o sangue e tirava proveito do beijo (14).

Baleia seems to understand the harshness of the situation, and uses her own talents to care for those whom she considers as her family.

Eventually, Baleia becomes ill, and Fabiano decides that the most humane course of action is to shoot her, saving her from an agonizing death. This is one of the moments in which we can see that Fabiano has not been completely dehumanized – wishing to end his dog’s suffering is certainly an act of kindness and humanity. What is significant

about this particular chapter, named for the dog, is that for the majority of it, we are seeing the events unfold from Baleia's point of view, just as we saw other chapters from the children's perspective or from Fabiano's or Sinhá Vitória's. Throughout the entire story, but most especially in these pages, we see that Baleia is more than a mere animal; she has the same desire to survive as her human masters, and, interestingly, the same way of dealing with danger – when Fabiano comes to complete his task, she flees, just as he and his family ultimately do in the last chapter.

As previously discussed, Fabiano is unable to confront any of his aggressors. An example of this would be when, given the opportunity to kill the *soldado amarelo*, he backs down. This was also his response when the *patrão* cheated him out of his wages – he blamed his wife for making him ask in the first place, and then left without his due. This theme will continue to the end of the novel, as we can see in the title of the last chapter – “Fuga.” Here, the *fazenda* is closing up because the animals have died, and Fabiano and his family are leaving:

. . . quando a fazenda se despovoou, viu que tudo estava perdido,
combinou a viagem com a mulher . . . largou-se com a família, sem se
despedir do amo. Não poderia nunca liquidar aquela dívida exagerada. Só
lhe restava jogar-se ao mundo, como negro fugido (117).

This “dívida exagerada” is obviously due to the *patrão*, who controls the stores, and charges exorbitant prices to workers he knows cannot afford them, thus causing them to fall further and further into an inescapable debt. Since Fabiano realizes that he has no hope of paying this off, he chooses to flee with his family rather than to face whatever punishment might befall him.

This last chapter, particularly the last paragraph, is particularly relevant and telling about Fabiano and his hopes and dreams. Throughout the course of the novel, certain goals have recurred, dreams which Fabiano really has no hope of realizing. He wants to send his children to school, where they can become educated, and perhaps learn to break free of this life that he himself has no hope of escaping. We also see the greatest dream of Sinhá Vitória, to have a permanent bed made from leather, representing a sense of stability that she has never known. Fabiano's thoughts travel to his own version of utopia, which, like with many *retirantes* in his position, manifests itself in dreams of the city, where the lure of jobs and schools attracts many dislocated farmers. But, even while he dreams of a better life elsewhere, he also realizes that he will never truly be able to break out of his current life:

Chegariam a uma terra desconhecida e civilizada, ficariam presos nela. E o sertão continuaria a mandar gente para lá. O sertão mandaria para a cidade homens fortes, brutos, como Fabiano, Sinhá Vitória, e os dois meninos (128).

As we see in the first sentence of this quote, regardless of where they are, be it a *fazenda* in the interior of the country or in a “civilized” city, this family will still be helpless within the social and political system. What the rest of the quote does is sum up the essence of the *sertão* – by its harsh nature, there will always be people who, despite being hard workers best suited for life on a *fazenda*, will be forced to head for the cities looking for opportunities to earn the money necessary to sustain themselves and their families.

Ramos's novel paints a vivid image of the harshness of life in the *sertão* during a time of drought. This harshness refers both to the natural elements, such as the brutal sun

drying up the land and the lack of water causing the livestock to perish, as well as to the behavior of the wealthy minority who manage to retain an iron-like grip over those less fortunate. Fabiano and his family represent a common type of people in this region – those who, through a sheer lack of other alternatives, are forced to submit to whatever injustices and abuses they may receive in order to survive. In many ways, they find themselves on a par with the animals they share their lives with, at the mercy of those in power, hoping to be allowed to live another day.

CHAPTER 4

O QUINZE

A DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVE OF THE *PATRÃO*

In the traditional *história sertaneja*, such as *Vidas Secas*, we have two opposing forces – the *retirante* or *sertanejo*, who is the poor, downtrodden, exploited worker, and the *patrão*, who is the inherently evil, avaricious member of the landed gentry, who feels no remorse for taking advantage of those with no hope or other recourses. One character evokes pity, the other, disdain. However, the author Rachel de Queiroz in her novel *O Quinze*, offers another perspective. In this work, we are allowed to see inside the house of the *patrão* and witness that there is in fact a human side, capable of feelings and compassion.

O Quinze follows the stories of two families, one poor, one wealthy, during the infamous drought of 1915. The first family is that of Chico Bento, a *retirante* who is forced to leave the farm where he works and attempts to take his family to the city where he hopes to find another position for himself. The other story deals with Conceição, a young woman from a wealthy family who comes to know Chico Bento through her cousin Vicente, who runs the family farm in the *interior*. The Conceição/Vicente storyline is divided between Vicente's experiences in the country and Conceição's life in the city. Through both of these characters, we can see another side of the family of the *patrão*, and see another way in which the wealthy interact with the poor laborers.

Vicente essentially runs the *fazenda* for his family, and therefore, unlike Antônio Moraes in Suassuna's story, works very closely with all the laborers. As a member of a wealthy family, he could easily decide to leave and move elsewhere when times get rough on the *fazenda*, unlike those who work for him. However, he chooses to stay and do what he can to keep the place running. Early in the story, he learns that the owner of one of the neighboring farms has decided to let the cattle go, rather than trying to maintain them during the drought. Vicente reacts to this news very unfavorably, saying, "Pois eu, não! Enquanto houver juazeiro e mandacaru em pé e água no açude, trato do que é meu!" (Queiroz 6). We see that not only does he lament the loss of all the cattle, he also feels sorry for the men who are subsequently losing their livelihood. As he says, "Do que tenho pena é do vaqueiro dela . . . Pobre do Chico Bento, ter de ganhar o mundo num tempo destes, com tanta família" (7). When Chico Bento later comes to him selling some animals prior to leaving the area, Vicente buys what he can, giving Chico Bento a fair price, knowing that he is in great need of the money.

Rather than the type of *patrão* that we saw in *Vidas Secas* or in *O Auto da Compadecida*, who did not care if the people who worked for them went hungry, Vicente recognizes the workers as people with needs and the right to the basics for survival. In this way, he breaks from the traditional perception of the wealthy, becoming a much more human character, and, as we shall see, his cousin Conceição takes this humanity and compassion one step further.

The character of Conceição is very interesting, in that she does not fit into the normal profile of a woman in a wealthy family. She is single, and in fact has no interest in marriage – "Conceição tinha vinte e dois anos e não falava em casar . . . dizia

alegremente que nascera solteirona” (5). Throughout the course of the novel the reader waits for her to become engaged to her cousin Vicente, but ultimately she decides that she prefers life as a single woman, working for the good of others.

At a time when most women in her position and of her age would be married and starting families, Conceição earns a living as a schoolteacher. Through her exposure to education and to many of the works written by some of history’s greatest thinkers, she has developed a perspective on humanity very different from those of her social position:

Conceição talvez tivesse *umas idéias*; escrevia um livro sobre pedagogia, rabiscara dos sonetos, e às vezes lhe acontecia citar o Nordau ou o Renan da biblioteca do avô.

Chegara até a se arriscar em leituras socialistas, e justamente dessas leituras é que lhe saíam as piores das tais *idéias*, estranhas e absurdas . . .
(5).

Given the unequal social climate of the region, one can see where an upper class woman with socialist tendencies would be considered unusual, even radical. People of her class would likely not worry unduly over the plight of those less fortunate, whereas she not only worries, she takes action.

In the city in which she resides there is a concentration camp, set up by the government as a location for the *retirantes* to find food and temporary shelter. Although one could also translate the term used in the book, “campo de concentração,” as a “refugee camp,” it would seem that these areas set aside by the government may have in fact more closely resembled the concentration camps later implemented during World War II. In an article discussing these camps, the journal *Aventuras na história* makes the

following statement about the official purpose of the *campos de concentração*, as well as their reality:

O objetivo dos campos era evitar que os retirantes alcançassem Fortaleza, trazendo "o caos, a miséria, a moléstia e a sujeira", como informavam os boletins do poder público à época. Naquele ano, criou-se o campo de concentração (era assim mesmo que se chamava) do Alagadiço, nos arredores da capital cearense, cenário do livro de Rachel, que chegou a juntar 8 mil esfarrapados, que recebiam alguma comida e permaneciam vigiados por soldados. A segregação dos miseráveis era lei, mas chegou um momento em que o flagelo em massa era tão chocante, com uma média de 150 mortes diárias, que o governo do Estado ordenou, em 18 de dezembro 1915, como contam os arquivos dos jornais da época, a dispersão dos flagelados, ou "molambudos", como eram também conhecidos ("Nos campos de seca").

Essentially, the people coming to the cities hoping to find aid found themselves instead under heavy guard, segregated from the rest of the city, barely receiving enough necessities to survive. This same article describes how hunger and disease were rampant, and in only a few short days, more than 200 people could die ("Nos campos de seca"). Far from being the welcoming, helping places the *retirantes* were hoping for, these camps were in fact for many a tragic end to a difficult life.

Conceição visits the camp in her city daily, giving money and aid to those in need. During one of her visits, she meets a woman whose husband had worked on the *fazenda* belonging to Vicente and his family. It is to this woman that Conceição

describes what she does at the camp and shows her compassion for others: “Todos os dias venho aqui, ajudar na entrega dos socorros . . . Se você tiver muita precisão de alguma coisa, me peça, que eu faço o que puder” (42).

As the story goes on, Conceição becomes more and more involved in the lives of these people, and more and more astounded at the depths to which many have fallen due to sheer desperation. One day, a woman with a baby knocks on her door, begging for whatever money or food can be spared. What we discover, though, is that the baby is not this woman’s child – “A mãe me empresta mode eu pedir esmola mais ele . . . Sempre dão mais, a gente indo com um menino. . .” (96). It turns out that this is an unfortunately common practice among the *retirantes* living at the concentration camp; people are more inclined to give money when a child’s life is at stake, so for a portion of the alms raised, a mother will lend out her baby.

As more and more *retirantes* find their way to the city, we see how the process of dehumanization affects them. This is the description of Chico Bento arriving by train with his family, disembarking from the train:

E sem saber como, acharam-se empolgados pela onda que descia, e se viram levados através da praça de areia, e andaram por um calçamento pedregoso, e foram jogados a um curral de arame onde uma infinidade de gente se mexia, falando, gritando, acendendo fogo (63).

With the exception of the fires being lit referred to at the end of this quote, one can almost see in Queiroz’s language the image of a herd of cattle being wrangled and moved into a corral. In effect, these people are being treated almost as cattle – they have a particular area where they have to live and are given daily rations that are to keep them

alive. Ironically, what has occurred is that people like Chico Bento have gone from being the *vaqueiros*, those tending the cattle, to being the ones “tended.”

In the camp itself, we see more of this dehumanization. As one can imagine, the turnover rate is very high here, due to starvation and illness and the constant need for more space as more people arrive. It gets to the point where death is so commonplace that no one really seems to notice it anymore, as we can see in this quote:

Conceição passava o dia inteiro no Campo de Concentração, ajudando a tratar, vendo morrer às centenas as criancinhas lazarentas e trôpegas que os retirantes atiravam no chão, entre montes de trapos, como um lixo humano que aos poucos se integrava de todo no imundo ambiente onde jazia (94).

The phrase “um lixo humano” evokes a very powerful image; it is hard to imagine the atmosphere of a place in which people’s bodies are thrown onto a garbage heap simply because there is nothing else to be done with them. In *Vidas Secas*, the city was viewed as a far-off paradise where the *retirantes* would find an end to their suffering; here we see that in fact the suffering is just as bad, if not worse, in the city.

The family of *retirantes* whose journey we follow in this story is that of Chico Bento, a rancher who worked for a neighbor of Vicente’s. The *dona* of that *fazenda* ordered that if it had not rained by a certain date, Chico Bento was to let the cattle loose to fend for themselves. The rain did not come, and Chico Bento found himself without work, and without a home, forced to begin a long journey to the city in hopes of the government assistance promised to aid those victimized by the drought.

It is through this character and his trials that the author presents the social climate of the region. As Maurício Pedro da Silva states:

Por meio da descrição do personagem, a autora nos revela uma condição social: pobre, ignorante, vivendo de favores e sofrendo as misérias da seca, Chico Bento representa, como aludimos há pouco, tipicamente a figura do retirante nordestino que, ao contrário de Conceição, encontra pouca oportunidade de melhorar sua situação (232).

In this way, Chico Bento becomes a sort of Everyman in terms of the life of the *retirante*, and through him we, the readers, will get a glimpse into the harsh world he inhabits.

Before they begin their trek through the desert, Chico Bento attempts to obtain train tickets for the city, as he had heard that the government was providing some to aid people in his situation. However, it turns out that, as I have previously discussed, the government is just like any of the other social institutions, and cares more about money than about people. As Chico Bento observes, “Desgraçado! quando acaba, andam espalhando que o governo ajuda os pobres . . . Não ajuda nem a morrer!” (21). He further vents his frustrations to his wife, Cordulina, when he arrives home without the tickets, saying, “Deus só nasceu para os ricos!” (21) Money continues to be the deciding factor in the way in which the world works, and a poor man like Chico Bento has few options as to how to support his family.

During the long, arduous journey to the city, the reader watches as this family slowly falls apart. Chico and Cordulina lose three members of the family before reaching their destination, and at each loss, we can sense the pain they feel. The first person they lose is Mocinha, Cordulina’s sister, who decides that she would rather stay to work for a

woman they meet in a town they pass through than to continue walking. She is a rather vain woman, who spends her time at this job flirting with the customers, and ends up earning money as a prostitute, an unfortunate, though sadly not uncommon, fate of women who find themselves with no other means of support.

At this point, there is little or no food left, and the family is forced to beg for whatever small rations people will give them. We can see the effects of starvation on one of the children – “O ventre lhe inchara como um balão. O rosto intumescera, os lábios arroxeados e entreabertos deixavam passar um sopro cansado e angustioso” (38). This child, Josias, becomes so hungry that he eats a piece of root that he digs out of the ground. Unfortunately, this particular root is poisonous when eaten raw, and he slowly dies. This particular chapter ends with a vivid image of his final moments – “E a criança, com o cirro mais forte e mais rouco, ia-se acabando devagar, com a dureza e o tinido dum balão que vai espocar porque encheu demais” (40).

The third loss is that of another child, Pedro, who disappears during the night. The family goes on to the next town, hoping to find that he is already there. They learn that he had been spotted by someone in the town – “num rancho de comboieiros de cachaça” (62). Pedro had apparently decided that he would have a better chance living and working with those people than with his family.

In this town we see an important social commentary dealing with the perception of the *retirantes*. When they arrive, Chico Bento knocks on the door of the *delegado* in order to report that his son is missing. He hears a voice inside, saying, “Abre não, menina, é retirante . . . É melhor fingir que não ouve” (60). It is only when Chico Bento insists that he has not come to beg for money that they open the door and consent to let

him speak with the *delegado*. What this scene shows us is that, due to this drought, there are many people without money or food who are forced to beg at every house along the way. Although one feels sorry for these *retirantes*, one can also understand the position of those who close their doors to them – after all, if they gave food or money to everyone who passed by, they would have none left for themselves. It is a very difficult and tricky situation, made more so by the human face that Queiroz gives to the family, much like what Graciliano Ramos did with Fabiano. After all, it is harder to ignore the pleas of people who you see as real human beings rather than as a faceless entity. In this way, novels such as those mentioned in this paper helped to create awareness and sentiment for those affected by the harsh conditions of the *sertão*.

Many of the elements of the culture of the *sertão* appear in this novel, such as the importance of religion, the effects of nature on the people, the close ties between people and the land, and the corruption and injustice linked to politics and other social institutions. Queiroz creates a world in which we can see the harshness of the landscape, feel the scorching heat of the sun, and sense the hopelessness felt by the farmers and the workers. And, in this story of the *sertão*, no one is safe from the harsh realities, regardless of their social or financial standings.

There are a number of instances in which we see the character's reliance on their faith to see them through difficult times. Right from the first lines of the book, we see the trust placed in her religion as Dona Inácia, Conceição's aunt, prays for rain to save her herd of cattle –

Depois de se benzer e de beijar duas vezes a medalhinha de S. José, Dona Inácia concluiu: ‘Dignai-vos ouvir nossas súplicas, ó castíssimo esposo da Virgem Maria, e alcançai o que rogamos. Amém’ (3).

As we discover, Dona Inácia has been saying novenas regularly for months, praying fervently for rain that never comes.

Later on, we see Chico Bento’s beliefs as a Christian. As he is walking through the desert with his family, he comes across another group of *retirantes*, who are cooking the foul carcass of a cow that had died of disease. Instead of letting these people eat the animal, an act that would have been tantamount to suicide, Chico Bento shares with them what little food he has, saying, “Eu vou lá deixar um cristão comer bicho podre de mal, tendo um bocado no meu surrão!” (28). When his wife admonishes him, asking what their family is going to eat after that, he responds, “Sei lá! Deus ajuda! Eu é que não havera de deixar esses desgraçados roerem osso podre” (29).

In terms of the impact of nature, there are numerous descriptions used in the novel, particularly dealing with the sun and the disaster it has caused in a land desperate for rain. At one point, we see Vicente’s feelings of hopelessness as he vainly tries to keep his *fazenda* going in spite of the lack of rain:

Parecia, entretanto, que o sol trazia dissolvido na sua luz algum veneno misterioso que vencia os cuidados mais pacientes, ressequia a frescura das irrigações, esterilizava o poder nutritivo do caroço, com tanto custo obtido (87).

After a year of drought conditions, all of his best efforts do not seem to have been enough.

Earlier in the story, we also saw Vicente's discontent regarding his situation. He is connected to this land, to this *fazenda*, but at the same time feels caged in by it – “Teve um súbito desejo de emigrar, de fugir, de viver numa terra melhor, onde a vida fosse mais fácil e os desejos não custassem sangue” (32). Vicente recognizes the hardships connected to life in the *sertão*, and longs for what he feels would be a better life. This shows a difference from the norm, given that Vicente comes from the family of the *patrão*, yet yearns to travel elsewhere, just like the families of *retirantes* who see far-off places as the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

In this story, this “pot of gold” is represented by the city of São Paulo, which becomes the ultimate destination of Chico Bento and his family. Although initially merely trying to get to the city where Conceição lives, where they find themselves living in the concentration camp, Chico Bento and his wife realize that they need to find something better, a more stable environment with more opportunities to earn money. Conceição suggests São Paulo as an alternative to a move to the Amazon region – “Por que vocês não vão para S. Paulo? Diz que lá é muito bom . . . Trabalho por toda parte, clima sadio . . . Podem até enriquecer” (79). With these words, Chico Bento, like many others in his situation, decides to move to the large city of the urban Southeast, hoping to be able to start a new life.

There are two instances dealing with the social institutions of the regions that I will now discuss. The first has already been mentioned in the scene in which Chico Bento goes to the *delegado* of a particular town to report his son missing. When he first arrives, after he convinces the people in the house that he is not there to beg for money, he is treated very coolly, dismissed by the *delegado* who shows no interest in helping to

locate the missing child – “Não tenho jeito que dar não . . . O menino, naturalmente, foi-se embora com alguém” (60). As a poor *retirante*, arriving in the town from who knows where, Chico Bento does not merit the concern or help of the *delegado*. However, once this man recognizes Chico Bento, and as it turns out he is the godfather to one of Chico Bento’s children, he is more than eager to help track down the missing Pedro. What this implies is that people do not receive aid based on merit or need; rather, they must have connections with those in authority in order to be granted basic forms of help.

The institution of the church also is the recipient of criticism in this story, although not to the same extent as in *O Auto da Compadecida*. As in Suassuna’s play, we see the church’s obsession with wealth, in which the bishops and priests enjoy a relatively easy life while their parishioners are starving. We see this in a scene taking place on the feast day of São Francisco, in which the procession is described thusly – “composta quase toda de retirantes, que arrastavam as pernas descarnadas, os ventres imensos, os farrapos imundos, atrás do pálio rico do bispo” (91). Mauricio Pedro da Silva comments on this scene, discussing the duality of the situation:

. . . onde a miséria pungente do povo e a riqueza infinita do corpo clerical se opõem francamente: de um lado, doentes miseráveis e esfarrapados a se arrastarem pelas ruas da cidade, num quadro comoventemente deplorável; de outro lado, a pompa do bispo, com seu rico pálio, seus deslumbrantes ornamentos, a conduzir a turba pauperizada (233).

We see the great contrast between the officials of the church, who do not want for material goods, and the *povo*, the people, who barely have what they need to survive. It would seem that Chico Bento, in the simple act of sharing his food with another family so

that they would not be forced to eat rotten meat, is acting like more of a Christian than those who are leaders of the Church, who flaunt their riches in front of those with nothing.

With this novel, Rachel de Queiroz has presented to the reader a very complex look at the world of the *sertão* during a time of drought. She has shown us the painful day-to-day struggle of the *retirantes*, as well as given us a look inside the home of the *patrão*, allowing us to see that not every member of the upper classes is obsessed with gaining money at the expense of others. Vicente and Conceição both feel pity for the *retirantes*, and do what they can to help them. However, these two are exceptions to the rule – as we see in many of the other characters and institutions of the region, these unfortunates do not often find adequate aid and many end up dying hungry and impoverished.

CHAPTER 5

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

As I have discussed, there are many themes which recur frequently in literature of the *sertão*. These range from the types of people represented, to the various social and political institutions of the area, to the impact of changes in the natural world. This paper presented three different works by three different authors, but all contained similar elements in terms of the pictures they painted of life in this region.

O Auto da Compadecida introduces readers to the general *tipos* to be found in the *sertão*, presenting them as caricatures which represent the different vices inherent to the particular walks of life. In this way, one gets a good overview to the stereotypical view of life in this region – from the wealthy landowner who looks down his nose at everyone socially and financially beneath him, to the *cangaceiro* operating outside of the law in his own form of vigilante justice. Through these characters and the way in which they interact, Suassuna presents the reader with an important social criticism related to the struggles between classes and the influence of society on the formation of a person's moral identity.

Graciliano Ramos's *Vidas Secas* continues the theme of social struggles, this time focusing primarily on the injustice inherent in the relationship between the *retirante* and political authority. Through Fabiano's interaction with the *patrão* and the *soldado amarelo*, we see how power and money become tantamount to law, and those without

either find themselves subject to the whims of others. In this way, people are lowered to being on a par with animals, as neither has any control over its own destiny.

Finally, *O Quinze* also deals with the helplessness inherent to the lives of the *retirante*, showing how Chico Bento and his family were forced to leave their homes because the owner of the *fazenda* chose to release the livestock. We see how the *retirantes* are treated by the majority of society, as pariahs to be avoided if at all possible. However, what makes this novel different is that two of the people who are doing what they can to help the poor also belong to the social class that most often scorns them, showing that not all *patrões* are heartless and indifferent to the needs of others.

By giving a face to the *retirantes* and the poor of the region, works such as these created more awareness of the plight of those affected by the droughts and the general hardships of life in the *sertão*. In this way, the literature of the Northeast helped to reshape ideas of Brazilian national identity, showing the importance of addressing the needs and singularities of a particular area.

The many recurring themes of these three works, particularly dealing with social and political inequality, are due primarily to the fact that these characteristics are all essential elements to the Brazilian *sertão*. In this way, the region itself enters into all of these works as a highly significant player, dictating the course of the lives of the other characters. Stylistically, although these three works were written by different authors in different years, the fact they all take place in the Northeast of Brazil serves to link them together, owing to the great influence of the *sertão* on the lives, and therefore the literature, of the region.

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