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A reappraised tragedy¹: “Lazzaro”², by Francisco Pereira da Silva³


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Abstract

This article approaches the play *Lazzaro* (1948), one of the first works by playwright Francisco Pereira da Silva, born in Piauí, Brazil, in which he uses the genre *intermezzo* interlaid in an essentially tragic work, in order to discuss its dramatic function in it. The play here analyzed presents many connections with the tragedy *Electra* in the versions of both Sophocles and Euripides. But while in the Greek plays Orestes is not an instrument of blind fate since he acts as his father’s conscious avenger and his sister’s protector, in Pereira da Silva’s work the text is a little more complex because it is mixed with other texts, be it with different Greek myths or other textual inspirations such as the New Testament. It suffices to pay attention to the character’s given name that is also the title of the play. Besides, in the Brazilian playwright’s work we find the transposition of the original myth to the home of a decaying family in Northeastern Brazil.




Keywords: Francisco Pereira da Silva. Tragedy. *Intermezzo*. New Testament.

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Uma tragédia revalorizada: Lazzaro, de Francisco Pereira da Silva

Resumo

Este artigo discute a peça *Lazzaro* (1948), uma das primeiras obras do dramaturgo piauiense Francisco Pereira da Silva, que faz uso do gênero *intermezzo*, intercalado numa obra de caráter essencialmente trágico, para discutir sua função dramática na obra. A peça em estudo possui muitos pontos de contato com a tragédia *Electra*, a partir de ambas as versões, de Sófocles ou de Eurípides. Mas, enquanto nas peças gregas, Orestes não é instrumento da fatalidade cega, pois age como um vingador consciente do pai e defensor da irmã, na obra de Pereira da Silva o texto é um pouco mais complexo, porque mistura outros textos, seja a partir de diferentes mitos gregos, seja a partir de outras inspirações textuais, como a do Novo Testamento, bastando que se atente para o nome de batismo do personagem que dá título à obra. Além do mais, no texto do dramaturgo brasileiro encontramos a transposição do mito original para o espaço do Nordeste, com o ambiente familiar de uma decadente família nordestina.

Palavras-chave: Francisco Pereira da Silva. Tragédia. *Intermezzo*. Novo Testamento.

Una tragedia revalorizada: *Lazzaro*, Francisco Pereira da Silva

Resumen

Este artículo analiza la pieza *Lazzaro* (1948), una de las primeras obras del dramaturgo piauiense Francisco Pereira da Silva, que usa el género intermedio, injerido en una obra de carácter esencialmente trágico, para discutir su función dramática en la obra. La pieza en estudio tiene muchos puntos de contacto con la tragedia *Electra*, en sus dos versiones, la de Sófocles y la de Eurípides. Pero si en las piezas griegas, Orestes no es instrumento de la fatalidad ciega, pues acciona como un vengador consciente del padre y de la defensa de la hermana, en la obra de Pereira da Silva es algo más complejo, porque mezcla otros textos, sea por diferentes mitos griegos, sea por otras inspiraciones textuales, como la del Nuevo Testamento, bastando que se ponga atención al nombre de bautismo del personaje del título de la obra. Además, en el texto del dramaturgo brasileño hallamos la transposición del mito original para el espacio del Nordeste, con el ambiente familiar de una decadente familia nordestina.

Palabras-clave: Francisco Pereira da Silva. Tragedia. Intermedio. Nuevo Testamento



Introduction

Francisco Pereira da Silva was born in Campo Maior, Piauí, Brazil on August 11, 1918, and died on April 8, 1985 in Rio de Janeiro. *Chiquinho*, as he was called by family and close friends, was one of the youngest in a family of six children. He spent his childhood and part of his youth in Campo Maior, leaving it to attend high school in São Luiz. As a child he was in contact with the back country world, formed by small farms and their people. On these locations people suffered with climatic fluctuations, sometimes with droughts, sometimes with floods. During this period he lived side by side with cowherds, *retirantes* (people leaving their places in search of a better life), and *cantadores* (vagrants who tell stories by singing) who later would inhabit his dramatic poetry as characters. Francisco, like two of his sisters, never married, being very attached to his nephews and nieces throughout his life:

To all of the preserved treasures, ideas and language from his childhood in Piauí, Chico would gather and integrate everything he saw or read about the other parts of Brazil or the world, from the present or the past making up the overflowing collection from which he harvested not only his themes but also the appropriate speech for each of them, which he handled impeccably. In very few authors, either from the country or the city, can we find such a powerful mastery of dialogue perfectly suited to period, social class and personality or, as in the precious case of **Amo por amar, que é liberdade** (I love for love's sake, which means freedom), the use of two conflicting levels of speech to identify the outdated and the modern (Heliadora, 2009, p.55).

He moved to Rio de Janeiro in 1942 in order to study Law. However, he radically changed his mind, graduated as a Librarian and worked until 1980 at the National Library.

He is a very little known and studied writer in Brazil even though he has left a significant number of very original works, mainly in drama:

It is not easy to be a man of the theater among us. That is why it is not surprising that a playwright, a man from the fields of Piauí, with a refined feeling and an elaborate, pure and clear language becomes an outcast, truly marginal. As if he were a snail he retires into his shell and his silence to die in solitude and, if not in poverty, leading a humble life, or even



worse, discredited, unable to stage his plays. Francisco Pereira da Silva in one of his last acts – life has many acts and many entrances and exits – decided to stop writing for the stage. He no longer wanted to feel distressed. He turned to fiction: He left a *cordel-novel*, **A revocata**, and a short story book, **As neves do Kilimanjaro** which, like most of his plays, remain unpublished (Costa, 2009, p.12-13).

During his first years in Rio de Janeiro, he joined a literary group, having two important scenographers as roommates, who would later become famous all over the country, but were beginners like him at that time: Anísio Medeiros and Sansão Castello Branco, both from Piauí. He had very good acquaintances and was close to people who became important in Brazilian culture, such as Paulo Francis⁶, a Brazilian journalist, theater critic and writer, and Luiz Carlos Barreto, journalist, reporter, photographer, cinematographer⁷ and translator.

These friendships may well have influenced and led him to take ventures as a screenplay writer and a theater critic for Diário Carioca⁸ and Última Hora⁹. However, Pereira da Silva was essentially a playwright.

As such, he always explored popular themes and the northeastern universe. He wrote his first play in 1945, a one-act tragedy, with the title *Viagem* (Trip). This play presents a feminine character, Luzia, torn between social ties and tradition, closely watched by death. In this play there are *pastoril*¹⁰ verses intermingled with

⁶ Franz Paulo Trannin Heilborn (born in Rio de Janeiro in 1930 and died in New York, USA, in 1997). Known as Paulo Francis, he was a journalist, critic, writer and theater director. He was one of the fiercest critics of Brazilian theater and quit it to dedicate himself to journalism, becoming a respected and controversial politics newspaper writer of his generation. For more details, see <http://enciclopedia.itaucultural.org.br/pessoa359279/paulo-francisd>

⁷ Luiz Carlos Barreto started his career in the movies in 1961, being considered one of the main people of the so-called Cinema Novo (New Movies). He was director of photography, and created the photographic concept of *Vidas secas* and *Terra em transe*, which made a revolution in the narrative style of Brazilian film. See <http://academiabrasileiradecinema.com.br/luiz-carlos-barreto/> for more details.

⁸ The newspaper Diário Carioca was founded in 1928 by José Eduardo de Macedo Soares. Biblioteca Nacional (the National Library) published the history of this communication medium in 2011. Available at : http://objdigital.bn.br/acervo_digital/div_obrasgerais/bndigital0001.pdf

⁹ The newspaper Última Hora was founded in Rio de Janeiro by Samuel Wainer, during President Getúlio Vargas' elected term. It was an important and controversial information medium from the 1950's on, because it attentively displayed the country's political and economic scene, by openly assuming a pro-president position.

¹⁰ Originated in Europe, *pastoril* is a *folgado* (frolic), i.e. a performance for popular amusement, typical of the Christmas Season. However, there are no verses to be sung or recited. It is composed of dance and music, especially in the state of Alagoas, where this tradition is stronger and lives on to our days.

the dialogue, that allow us to perceive a certain similarity to some of Federico Garcia Lorca's¹¹ first phase works, mainly in the way in which Pereira da Silva portrays the Brazilian northeastern back country, impregnated with poetry and lyric imagery, analogous to Andalusian Spain (Costa, 2009, p.16).

In 1948 he wrote the tragedy *Lazzaro*, based on the myth of Electra. As stated in the work's cover sheet:

Adapted from the Greek myth Electra (from Sophocles' and Euripedes' plays) to the environment of a Northeastern small town. As in the Greek myth, Lurdes, the daughter, insists with Lazzaro, her brother, that they should revenge their father's death, blamed on their mother, Almerinda, and her new husband, Martins¹², the corrupt and despotic mayor self-promoted to colonel (p. 89)¹³.

The play was never staged by professionals, only by an amateur group connected to Paschoal Carlos Magno, directed by Pernambuco de Oliveira, at Teatro Duse, in 1952¹⁴. This was Pereira da Silva's first play to be staged, for which he was awarded the prize Best New Author, by Associação Brasileira de Críticos Teatrais – ABCT (Brazilian Association of Theater Critics).

In spite of his prolific, good quality work, recognized by part of the intellectuals and stage artists of his time, he did not overcome the stigma of being a playwright who wrote about Northeastern Brazil and its people although, as previously mentioned, he worked on themes from several sources of universal literature and culture. This fact, added to his shyness, may have kept him from taking higher flights in Brazilian theater.

Juca Ferreira¹⁵, in the introduction to the three volumes that comprise Pereira

¹¹ Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) was a poet and playwright, one of the greatest names in Spanish literature. His themes in poetry were the landscape and popular costumes from his homeland, Andalusia. As a playwright his choice was historical drama, such as farce. Later he achieved success with the so-called country *tragedies* such as *Blood wedding* (1933) and *The house of Bernarda Alba* (1936).

¹² In the edition used, the character's name is spelled Martins. However, two pages later, in the roll of characters, and along the whole play it is spelled Martim. Considering the Portuguese origins of Northeastern Brazil, the name Martim makes more sense than Martins.

¹³ The edition used is the one organized by Virgílio Costa, *Teatro completo de Francisco Pereira da Silva*, Rio de Janeiro, FUNARTE. 2009, in three volumes.

¹⁴ Teatro Duse was a Brazilian drama laboratory created in 1952, at the home of dramatist Paschoal Carlos Magno, and closed in 1957.

¹⁵ João Luiz Silva Ferreira, Best known as Juca Ferreira, a Brazilian sociologist and politician born in Bahia, dedicated his professional life to politics and cultural activities, working mainly as a cultural manager. He



da Silva’s complete works, writes about his choice of themes:

By making the poverty and dryness of Northeastern Brazil his main theme he formed, along with Ariano Suassuna and Osman Lins, a triad of great regional playwrights. Determined to bear witness to his homeland and people, he declared himself a true northeastern man: “*cordel, the violeiros’* improvisations, and the singing of the blind men run in my blood.” This statement can be confirmed by reading **Cristo proclamado**, **Chapéu de sebo** and **Chão dos penitentes** (Ferreira, 2009, p.7).

Sérgio Mamberti¹⁶, at the time President of Fundação Nacional das Artes (FUNARTE) (National Foundation for the Arts) reports in the same edition his first contact with Pereira da Silva’s writings. Going deep into his memories, stating that he met him in 1964 in Rio de Janeiro he writes:

I had references of his work because I had seen **O vaso suspirado** at Teatro Jovem and **Cristo proclamado**, directed by Gianni Ratto, staged by Teatro dos Sete, with Fernanda Montenegro and Sérgio Britto. Over the years I spent in Rio, until 1967, I saw **O chão dos penitentes**, directed by Kleber Santos, at Teatro Jovem, and heard favorable comments on the staging of **Chapéu de sebo**. Chico was a career employee at Biblioteca Nacional and an extremely unpretentious artist. In the few occasions we met, I could praise the quality of his work and see he was also very shy. Actually, Francisco Pereira da Silva – as it usually is the case with authors that produce above average quality writing – did not receive due recognition during life, mainly if we consider the number and greatness of his plays. This talented artist born in Piauí has left us a legacy of 32 plays that reveal the diversity of Brazil, and portray with deep poetry the rich universe of northeastern culture (Mamberti, 2009, p.9).

In the opening note Virgílio Costa¹⁷, the complete works’ organizer, makes attentive and sensitive comments on the playwright’s biography and the presence of childhood memories in many of his plays:

served two terms, in 2008 and in 2014, at the Ministry of Culture.

¹⁶ Sérgio Mamberti, a Brazilian actor and cultural manager, held several positions over the past years at the Ministry of Culture, as director of the departments of Performing Arts, Music, Cultural Diversity, Cultural Policies, and as President of Fundação Nacional das Artes (FUNARTE), during the 2008-2010 term.

¹⁷ Virgílio Costa is a writer, painter, and historian, son of Odylo Costa (filho), a great Brazilian poet and writer. He is a History researcher at Casa Rui Barbosa, in Rio de Janeiro, having published several works on History and Literature. He lived in New York for over ten years and in several places in Europe, working as a journalist and art critic. He has an MA and a PhD in Arts. During his post-doctorate in Arts at New York University in 1995, Marshall Berman was his advisor.



Francisco's fragile tools: sensitivity, delicate poetry, accurate language; he was subtle, many times ironic, never spiteful. Being a storyteller, he found his reality in words. His fantasy is represented, his winds, his river, his corrals, his *carnaúbas* were transplanted. He recreated his world, the one of his childhood and the one of his adulthood, made of blood, laughter, wild flowers, real cultures, real people, and real life, a mix of good and evil. Make believe, laughter, smiles, tragedy. He was, above all, a storyteller. Those were the stories I heard, as a child, in his apartment. Beautiful stories of João Grilo, Carochinha, Titiringô cow, of the forbidden words. In his refined, discreet and isolated world we had, my brothers and sisters and I, a private magician during our whole life (Costa, 2009, p.11).

It can be observed in Pereira da Silva's writings that he has a deep knowledge of the back country and that it is chosen as the main *locus* of his works. But this is only one of his creative strategies. Although he spent his adult life in Rio de Janeiro, he remained faithful to his northeastern roots. His plays are marked by northeastern myths and traditions, intermingled with childhood and adolescence memories. His mythic-poetic back country is (re)constructed with careful artistry and poetry. He actually develops universal themes from his contemporary ones.

His gallery of characters revives primeval myths with the strength of subjectivity, by means of a very personal and deeply creative language, in productive dialogues with writers of universal literature, which makes his dramatic work entirely new in Brazil. For him, *new* represents recapturing the old i.e. going into themes, characters, stories and oral tales from Northeastern Brazil popular songs and poetry that recall myths, legends and classic novels, including medieval feasts. His great contribution is the blending of such sources, producing a new reading and proposing totally innovative genre crossings, as is the case in *Lazzaro*.

In 1985 Chico Pereira Week was held in Teresina, capital of Piauí. Several of his plays were staged and honors were paid to the most renowned, playwright from the state of Piauí. This event highlighted his work and brought it some attention from the local media, allowing his name to become more widely known to the people from his state and to Brazilians in general.



“Lazzaro”, according to Francisco Pereira da Silva

The fate that fell upon the Atreidae¹⁸ and their children is one of the most reiterated myths of Greek drama, having originated multiple dramatic versions in different cultures along the centuries. Therefore, it is not surprising that several transpositions of this narrative from Greek mythology are found in works of universal drama, such as *The flies*, by Jean-Paul Sartre. It is obvious that each work’s source is the original myth that is reshaped according to its author’s perspective. That is the case with some Brazilian plays, among which we mention Lazzaro, by Pereira da Silva.

Lazzaro is inspired in the tragedy *Electra*¹⁹, by Sophocles, later revisited by Euripides, but with a great difference: In the Greek plays, Orestes acts consciously as his father’s avenger and his sister’s defender. In the case of Pereira da Silva, who explicitly makes reference to the Greek myth, other themes are included, even if parenthetically, inspired in other Greek myths such as *Oedipus rex*, also by Sophocles, from which Sigmund Freud theorized the *Oedipus complex* that explains the son’s fixation for his mother²⁰. In the so-called *Electra complex*, the daughter has a fixation for her father. So, in the plot the Brazilian text is not only mixed with Greek myths but also renewed, and a re-reading occurs:

→ Lurdes, the daughter, would be Electra from the original Greek myth; she accuses her mother of having murdered her father, becoming her nephew’s and ex-servant’s lover; so, she waits for her brother Lazzaro’s return, Orestes, to take her revenge;

→ Lazzaro returns, but as he is informed by his sister of their mother’s (Almerinda) presumed betrayal all that he wants is to make the illegal relationship official through marriage. When Lazzaro accidentally kills his mother’s lover, Martim, who had become house lord and city mayor, he falls in such a deep despair

¹⁸ Atreu’s sons, Agamemnon and Menelaus. For more details see the mentioned characters’ entries in Rute Guimarães. *Dicionário da mitologia grega*. São Paulo: Cultrix, 1974.

¹⁹ Hermilo Borba Filho inspired himself in the myth of Electra when he wrote *Electra no circo* (1944). Nelson Rodrigues did the same in one of his mythic plays, *Senhora dos afogados* (1947).

²⁰ The Electra complex was idealized by Carl Jung, in opposition to the Oedipal complex.



that he seeks his mother to explain himself. Then he perpetrates a second murder, induced by his sister who had handed him a dagger, but in both cases the young man was not really conscious of his acts. When he realizes he committed a crime against his mother, he despairs:



LAZZARO – I've killed her. I've killed her.

LURDES – I can hear you.

LAZZARO – No, no, I didn't mean it, Lurdes, I didn' mean it.

LURDES – Yes, you've killed her.

LAZZARO – Quiet!

LURDES – I can hear you.

LAZZARO – I love her so much, Lurdes, so much... I wanted her to believe me, to apologize, but no, she loved that one better and turned her back on me. She fell down, I held her by the neck, my lips kissed her eyes and I asked her to forgive me – I didn't mean it, mother, forgive me.

.....

LAZZARO – A dagger... I wish I had been killed (Silva, 2009, p.118).

Pereira da Silva's work can be praised for transferring the original myth to the Brazilian back country and the environment of a northeastern decaying family.

And this is where it is supposed that he may have reached his higher value as a playwright: There are very interesting creations such as the madwoman Perpétua, who is present through the whole play (as if she were making comments, in a language different from Anselmo's, about what is going to be said subsequently, the occurrences); there is also a group of three Laundresses (reminiscing the Greek tragedy original chorus) who effectively relativize the events poetically, because it is mainly through the Laundresses that the voices of popular culture are heard, specially by means of four-verse rhymes and superstitious sayings. But most important, the drought started long ago in the landscape of Monte Azul (that is now called Martinópolis as determined by the new mayor Martim). This is what occurs in the first part or first act, as the reader wishes.

But on the second part, curiously after an *intermezzo* that is worthy of special comments, and as the tragedy unravels to its end, the rain makes itself announced and falls heavily, driving away the drought. The image of the sheets hung out by the Laundresses acquires a new poetic strength: as the rain cleans the sheets – the crime – it somehow purges the previous murder that is confessed



by Almerinda to her daughter, during one of their arguments:

LURDES – What can be covered up? I know more, I saw your lust while breaking pieces of glass and grinding them.

ALMERINDA – Lurdes?

LURDES – Grinding, grinding... a light powder, so fine... mixed into the milk, during breakfast, into the sugar. Sugar, sugar, sugar...

ALMERINDA – Infamous!

LURDES – And my father wasted, his bowels melted, red, his eyes hardly hid fright and horror. He held me tight, ran his hands through my forehead, his fingers through my hair, I felt he searched for a secret, a secret I did not want to tell.

ALMERINDA (tired) – I've killed him, I've killed him.

LURDES – At last you confess, and Lazzaro sleeps. I, I am the sole witness (Silva, 2009, pp. 110-111).

Thus, while the play portrays the climate's dryness it goes deeply into human viciousness.

According to Pierre Grimal (s/d, p. 133), Electra is the name of several legendary figures. However, the most popular of them is doubtlessly the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. The Greek myth of Electra²¹ is the main line of three tragedies: *The suppliants*, by Aeschylus; *Electra*, by Sophocles; *Electra*, by Euripides. Two of them are explicitly titled Electra, from the Greek Ἠλέκτρα, which means radiant woman. The third one, supposedly the most ancient of them, is titled The suppliants, *Χοηφόροι* in Greek, referring to entities or witches that should take offerings to the dead. They were transformed into priestesses by goddess Athena after having forgiven Orestes' crime – killing his mother to avenge his father's death and save his sister.

Actually, the play is the third one of the only known complete cycle of tragedies, not only by Aeschylus, in which the playwright had the opportunity to fully develop the myth he had chosen to recreate. In this case, the final play starts with Orestes running from the vengeful Moirai's persecution after having murdered his mother. In order to do that, trying to escape from the punishment of the so-called ancient gods, he counts on the sympathy of Apollo, one of the new gods, who suggests that he seeks the so-called goddess of wisdom, Athena. Orestes is

²¹ For more information on Electra's myth see Guimarães, 1974.



eventually forgiven by her. In face of the revengeful goddesses' protests, Athena proposes to transform them into kind goddesses, which would cease their being feared and hated to become loved, and they accept it ²².

Euripides' Electra differs from those of Aeschylus and Sophocles mainly because the scenes and characters he created are closer to our times, with a connotation more similar to the secular ways of acting and feeling, less ruled by religion. This may be why his version is the most inspiring for modern works. Also, Euripides' character is more willful and mainly more self-conscious.

But this is not the case in Pereira da Silva's play. Although the versions chosen by him for inspiration were explicitly those of Sophocles and Euripides, what actually underlies the plot is the wrath of Rafael Mendonça's (Agamemnon) daughter, Lurdes (Electra), who persecutes her mother Almerinda (Clytemnestra), blaming her for the father's death and the family dishonor caused by her taking her nephew Martim (Aegisthus), an old farmhand, for a lover. This union, as in Sophocles' and Euripides' tragedies, cause Lazzaro's (Orestes) exile. He is sent away to live with an uncle. Lazzaro becomes a sailor and, in the beginning of the dramatic action, he is in a harbor close to his homeland when he is recognized by old Anselmo, whom he also recognizes and thus is urged to return home.

Pereira da Silva calls the play a tragedy in two acts. However, he placed an *intermezzo* between them. The characters are the same in both parts but receive different emphasis. In part one, where the plot and the situation are presented, Almerinda and Martim are somehow highlighted. In part two, Lurdes and Lazzaro are, i.e. the murderers in the first crime are replaced by the ones in the second crime. However, as Lazzaro/Orestes does not have the same willfulness and self-consciousness of the original mythic character, there is a change in emphasis because actually the main dramatic figure will seem to be Lurdes, not the young man. Nevertheless, the play's title highlights Lazzaro. How can that be explained?

The plot is developed around the household nucleus, family relationships and property, so-said bases of modern man. The town is decaying and the family

²² Some scholars say that this work also documents the transformation of Ancient Greece, rural and matriarchal, into a modern, urban and patriarchal society, when heredity ceases to occur through the mother and starts occurring through the father.



dissolving. It is presented as a melting pot of vices, open war and lack of love, in which property (the house, the store, the town) is the cause of fierce contention, in which feelings are totally false and betrayals are constant: the husband betrays his wife Almerinda who, in turn, betrays her husband with a nephew, later her lover; Martim betrays his new lover with a prostitute, just as he betrays the prostitute by not abiding to his promises before taking her away from the cabaret.

Pereira da Silva recaptures the original Greek myth once the plot is practically the same, but he does not feel tied by the source texts. The Brazilian version is not only set in the poor and dry back country, but the main character actually does not seem to be the Lazzaro from its title.

This is where attention should be turned to the *intermezzo* that simply by its existence and location seems to relativize the genre itself – the tragic. From what is known about Greek drama, it was the *old comedy* – mainly found during the crisis period of great Greece, when the Peloponnesian Wars had started and the old values and principles of Greek culture were being questioned – that was structured in two parts, with an intermezzo connecting them, a moment when the playwright himself went upon the stage to address the audience. There he made use of the right to freedom of speech: parrhesia. The playwright not only explained his intentions but could even expand his speech in a direct criticism to the rulers of the time. This is the tradition of which Pereira da Silva evidently makes use, adapting it to the tradition of Brazilian northeastern popular culture: Anselmo is the old farmhand who knows all the facts. That is precisely why he can be ironic as it occurs, for example, in a dialogue with Lazzaro:

LAZZARO – Once he cut himself in the glasses on this wall to catch a thief [Lazzaro is talking about Martim].

ANSELMO – It was no thief.

LAZZARO – I remember he shot, shot upwards. No doubt he would not kill the thief.

ANSELMO – And the bullet hit his own heel, that's funny.

LAZZARO (upset) – So it was he who jumped over the wall?

ANSELMO – Jumped. He jumps no more.

LAZZARO – What are you saying?

ANSELMO – Nothing. People used to say it. Not anymore (Silva, 2009, p. 103).

These lines, which are hilarious, show that Anselmo knows about everything



and that Lazzaro is completely naïve. But Anselmo, revealing in advance facts the Lurdes will later tell her brother, gives him some details. As the dialogue above shows, *Lazzaro* brings some traces of comedy because it reveals an ironic and critical view of the world and the modern man.

From the comments above the (double) function of the *intermezzo* can be observed, as intended by Pereira da Silva: Anselmo i.e. the actor who plays Anselmo takes off his mask revealing who he is but simultaneously and contradictorily announces himself as the author's spokesman and judge:

ANSELMO – All right. As you've seen, I was chosen by the Director to play the role of Anselmo, the author's idea to conduct a story I'm sick of hearing. It is, as you've already figured out, a transposition of the Atreidae to the Northeast, a big dream of the northeastern beginner, right? [...] And why – going back the Northeastern Atreidae – I assume the novice Author retreated before the horror of this Goya's panel that, with few exceptions, is a theme discredited by clichés of the kind "when the sun sets, it is like a bonfire, and so on" [...] That's why, I think, our hardworking apprentice, under the dominion of the gods, I mean the Greek, both ancient and modern, chose to describe the dirty life of a so-called important family, in such an unimportant town I dare say is not in the Northeastern map [...] Is tragedy part of our culture? [...] But the author insists on the tragedy and says that more terrible than the drought is the affliction of Freedom (Silva, 2009, p.105 and 106).

Thus, this *intermezzo* serves several purposes: Anselmo ties the ends of the somehow distant ends of the plot. On the other hand, placing himself as a character, he can question the author (a playwright's irony, evidently) and he presents the reader/spectator the key question to understand.

In this case, both the reason why the playwright has chosen an original myth, blending it with another, and why he gave the play, as a title, the name of the character who at least at first sight would not be the most important. However, it becomes evident above all the fact that Pereira da Silva chose this myth because it allowed him to reach his goal as a writer: discussing ethics and freedom, freedom to live and freedom to die. At the same time, using this family that is falling apart as a background it becomes evident that contrarily to what the Actor thinks, there is a connection between the private and the general. Just as Martim and Almerinda do not hesitate to commit crimes out of passion and ambition (individual), such



crimes and ambitions explain why regions like the Northeast have never managed to be away from tragedies (collective) such as the drought.

Thus, the *intermezzo* is not a playwright's fancy or a joke, but a narrative strategy that allows him to discuss and explain his objectives while writing the play. Yes, for a novice it was a big dream.

Not only the blend of genres puzzles the reader/receptor of Lazzaro; it also raises questions. Why is the play's title Lazzaro? Why does the character's name have the Italian and not the Portuguese spelling?²³ Why not entitle the play Lurdes or even Electra? Which leads did the playwright want to leave by making this choice? Why does he call the genre *intermezzo* and not *entremez*, as it is called in Portuguese? Which effect does the fact that the *intermezzo* is placed between the two acts cause at the end of the play? Putting it more clearly – what is the relationship of the action in the *intermezzo* with the content of the two acts?

The great playwrights like to question themselves, the audience and society without giving direct answers, always leaving their conclusions unsaid. Most of the time reasoning is what matters, more than conclusions do.

Through the analysis of theme choices, views of the immediate world or parodies of other periods, many conclusions can be drawn about each playwright's creative process and esthetic choices. The playwright can also hint at the goal of his (re)creation.

Assumptions can be made about such choices without knowing or drawing conclusions about which would be the actual reasons for choosing play titles or creating characters. Anyway, Literary Theory is very positive when it points out that the final meaning of the text is up to the reader, not to the author. In the case of Pereira da Silva, some facts connected to his biography call our attention, as it can be perceived that he seems to be fascinated with Christian stories and myths. He constantly turns to Western Judeo-Christian themes, characters and moral. However, in this play, the explicit theme is a Greek myth. But the character's name has to do with the Judeo-Christian myth of the New Testament, thus bringing

²³ In the 1952 staging of the play, its title ceased to be spelled in Italian, and the Portuguese spelling was used – Lázaro. As a curiosity, Italian writer Luigi Pirandello wrote a play with the same title in 1928 and staged in 1929. In this case, it is directly connected to the character of the New Testament.



about a crossing of meanings.

As Greek mythology has been approached, let us do the same with Judeo-Christian mythology. In the New Testament there are two passages about men named Lazarus. Evangelist John (11: 43 e 44) tells the story of a family that lived in Bethany, formed by Lazarus and his sisters Martha and Mary. One day Lazarus fell severely ill and died. As Jesus was away, it took him a few days to return. When he arrived, Lazarus had already been buried. Jesus called him to come out of his sepulcher. Lazarus was miraculously raised from the dead, making a great commotion and repercussion among people from that small place.

It is a story in which Jesus would be a character beside Lazarus, having a direct relationship with him. The second passage is told by Evangelist Luke (16: 20 e 21), mentioning Lazarus as a character in a parable told by Jesus, about an extremely poor man called Lazarus who begged among the rich men in the village. One day Lazarus met a very rich man who was a miser and refused to help him. After some time both of them died. Lazarus went to Heaven and the miser went to Hell. There is an indirect relationship between Jesus and Lazarus. This is clearly a parable, as it interprets the fact and draws a moral point from it.

The connection between the two passages is the fact that, in both of them Lazarus is a simple God-fearing man, and that is why he will be saved. In one of the passages he is raised from the dead. In the other he is rewarded going to Paradise. One way or another, Lazarus is rewarded for his God-fearing behavior. There is compensatory reason and logic for the fact of Lazarus' resurrection, either returning to life, in the first passage, or being rewarded with Paradise, in the second one. But this is not what happens to Lazzaro in the play discussed here, which leads the character to ask himself:

LAZZARO – [...] the useless return. Why return? To learn that my mother is a murderer? And the murderer of my own father... Why return? To learn how to pretend? I, a pretender. How terrible it is to pretend. To whom? So beautiful, so beautiful ... Her eyes looking intensely, deeply into mine, searching for understanding. (He weeps. Lurdes hugs and caresses him. He weeps convulsively). Lurdes, my sister, I ask you: have mercy, have mercy on her. Mother, my mother... (p. 115).

This passage raises two important questions for the renewed perspective of



the old myth: on the one hand, as previously said, Lazzaro's fixation for his mother, bringing back the Oedipus complex; on the other hand, Lazzaro's realization that his return is useless. So, the play also makes a connection with the Parable of the Prodigal Son, (also from the New Testament) reversing it. When Lazzaro returns home after being away for a long time, although his return is apparently celebrated both by his sister and his mother, he actually finds a destroyed house and a broken family.

There is still another consideration: as a librarian and a cultured man, Pereira da Silva may have wanted to indirectly refer to a work of great importance in universal literature, the anonymous Castilian novel *The life and adventures of Lazzarilo de Tormes* published in the 16th Century. This work belongs to the genesis of picaresque novel and is a strong criticism of society and institutions at the time. *Lazarillo* is the diminutive form of Lazzaro (Bodnar, 2017, p.223).

This term is used to name the person or animal (guide dog) that follows or guides a person, as a blind one, who needs to go from place to place. Such people, in the Middle Ages, used to be extremely poor and walked from town to town. Another hypothesis is that the playwright may have created a dialogue with another aspect of the Middle Ages once the name, although connected to the figure of a saint, had its origin in a pagan festivity. Mikhail Bakhtin, while studying Middle Age popular culture, mentions Saint Lazarus' feast:

In Marseille, on Saint Lazarus' day, all horses, mules, donkeys, bulls and cows were taken all over town in a procession. The whole population wore costumes and danced magnum tripudium in squares and on the streets. This was because the character Lazarus was connected to a cycle of legends about hell, with a material and bodily topographical connotation (hell = material and bodily lower part) and to the motive of death and resurrection. Thus Saint Lazarus' feast captured the practices of several local pagan feasts (Bakhtin, 2008, p.69).

The medieval feast of Saint Lazarus, that has primitive roots, suggests that Lazarus visits Hell before he is saved. Judeo-Christian versions, however, take Lazarus to Heaven even though he previously makes a passage through Purgatory²⁴.

²⁴ The concept of purgatory, although of Jewish origin, was made dogmatic by the Catholic Church through the Councils of Lyon (1274), Florence (1438-1445) and Trent (1545-1563).

It is impossible to be sure of Pereira da Silva's real intention while choosing the tragedy's title. Therefore, it may be more significant to point out the different routes that can be followed to face this issue. It is important to emphasize that all of the possibilities mentioned are tenable since they are potential perspectives for a study of the work focusing its characters. Anyway, the fact that the play is titled Lazzaro allows the two first and precious considerations – the name itself and its spelling²⁵.

A long scenic description opens the tragedy Lazzaro (p. 93) in Part I, describing the town and the scenery as well as the historic period in which it takes place:

(Drought in an old small town in the Northeast. Everything turns yellowish and the sun, a terrible, beautiful Sun, wipes the earth from east to west. It is dawn – nearly daybreak – the sheets hung on clothes lines hide the back of an old manor. The year is 1940. Lurdes, in white stands stiffly, in front of the white sheets. Perpétua (the insane) is heard singing: Death took her feet and hands, the light from her eyes and the strings of her heart. Perpétua is seen behind and above the hung sheets. She is standing on a pillar of an old wall in ruins. The dialogue that follows is more like a soliloquy. Both of them have a static face, as if they were looking at a distant point) (Silva, 2009, p.93).

The small town is Monte Azul, later (re)named Martinópolis; the story takes place in 1940²⁶, as seen above. It can be perceived, from the description, that the dry and dusty small town in the Northeast is a spatial and social corner that did not evolve and keeps living habits from the medieval period, very much present in small back country towns.

In the first scenes a poetic portrait can be observed in the description of the landscape and in the dialogues, reminiscent of Lorca's works, thanks to a metaphysical/religious approach noticed in Lurdes' lines referring to her mother's religiousness; "You are delirious and they sleep. A candle pours light on the images of her saints and she sleeps calmly. No! The spiders weave their webs during the night and this lost house turns to ruins..." (Silva, 2009, p. 94). Again, Pereira da Silva

²⁵ About the issue of titles of works of art, see Ana Cláudia Munari Domingos et Antonio Hohlfeldt, 2020.

²⁶ This places the tragedy immediately after the beginning of World War II, which Brazil had not yet joined. At the same time, it is the period of Estado Novo, that started in 1937. The town can be seen as a metaphor of the country.



reminds us of the Spanish playwright while poetically describing the chaos brought about by the drought: “The animal carcasses await the rain and grass will grow over them” or “dust is raised in a whirlwind” (Silva, 2009, p. 96-97).

In the play, the family is represented as an important microcosm in the back country context. Social hierarchy is seen through the filter or criticism and many times a character’s name or nickname identifies his function in the community. But this universe is decaying. Consequently, an objective social criticism is developed in the play, as it shows the difference in social levels and the follies of the powerful (Almerinda and Martim). Houseworkers are placed in another social level, well below the owners. At the same time, the small farm owners equally took the town’s political power. Martim even changes the name of the town from Monte Azul to Martinópolis, in honor of himself, without consulting the dwellers, acting as a typical *coronel*.

Some important clues are given along the play, which are revealed throughout the plot. One of them is the fact that Lurdes is always connected to the white color, as in the first direction: she wears white, standing stiffly in front of the white sheets. Afterwards the laundresses call her Rosa Branca (White Rose) and, later *garça branca* (snowy egret)²⁷. But the character is somber, treacherous surviving at the cost of one single obsession – avenging her father. Another clue is the Laundresses chorus that is somewhat like a social voice that helps tell the story. They actually reveal details of the plot and different points of view about the characters. In the old tragedy the chorus played two roles: a collective character and the poet’s spokesman. That is why all information coming from it are relevant for the reader to understand the plot and what underlies what is said. But why a laundresses chorus? It is said that the laundresses were famous for gossiping. They washed dirty clothes in a metaphoric sense, their own and that of their employers’, whom they observed attentively.

In country towns it is common to find places for collective washing of clothes, in rivers and dams. Well-to-do families hired laundresses who were poor and lived

²⁷ Symbolically, the snowy egret represents someone who allows herself to break traditions and rules, living life her own way. Lurdes, the *snowy egret*, takes over the social role that would be more fit for a man, her brother. But as he resigns this function, she is the one who even induces her brother to carry out the double murder and then urges him to flee saying that she will take responsibility for the crimes (Silva, 2009, p.119).



in town or in the neighborhood, whose job was washing and ironing clothes. This work granted them an extra income or even survival. It should be noted that Pereira da Silva creates these feminine characters connected to water, cleaning and the sea with strong mysticism. The gathering of several women, for several hours, allowed an Exchange of information, news and facts, some of which true, others obviously false and malicious. That is why they were often considered as a source of slander.

Irony and criticism of social institutions can be found throughout the play. Almerinda says clearly that the priest and the judge are close friends, mentioning that the town should recognize them as illustrious citizens. Martim answers that the priest is a flatterer. During this dialogue Almerinda says that the priest asked her about the wedding date. Martim changes the subject putting an end to the talk by calling her for lunch. Thus, a criticism of the religious institution can be perceived, as the local clergy accepts the aunt being her nephew's concubine (Bodnar, 2017, p.230).

Obviously because of political and financial interests as Almerinda is a trader and her future husband is the mayor, even though they are pressed to make the relationship legitimate, which they know is not because it is the result of a murder. It is also easy to understand why Almerinda got away with the accusation of murdering her husband, as she is a friend of the judge's, which gives her freedom to act without suffering consequences.

Seeking to find her brother Lurdes asks Anselmo to look for him and bring him home. Lazzaro returns to his homeland with Anselmo (Pylades), who tells him about the news and changes at home and in town.

Upon his arrival, Lazzaro is overwhelmed by several memories of the dry and blood-red landscape, so familiar and at the same time so distant because of the years of absence. He remembers his father, his childhood, and picking fruit off the tree. Lazzaro says: "it is as if I had died and resurrected" (Silva, 2009, p.102), reinforcing the idea that this character is so named because of the interface with the Biblical Lazarus, who died and was resurrected.

However, Lazzaro finds out that Martim, previously an employee of the family, had become Sergeant Zé Martim and Captain Mayor of town, and now lives in the house that belonged to his father. That is when Anselmo hints at the new dweller's



character and old stories surface, suggesting that he used to *jump over the wall* to be with Almerinda while her husband was still alive.

Afterwards Lazzaro meets Lurdes. It happens precisely when he is engaged in a game they used to play when they were children. At sundown they used to walk blindfolded in a straight line describing all of the imagined places on their way. They played until they heard an imaginary bell, when the clouds went down to sleep and night covered everything.

It should be observed that Lazzaro does not return in order to carry out any revenge, mainly because he does not know about the past events involving his parents, but it will be encouraged and planned by his sister, who creates opportunities and strategies to achieve the tragic end.

It can be observed that 'Pereira da Silva plays with the tense atmosphere during the whole tragedy by mixing dramatic events with ridiculous situations that end up being comic' (Bodnar, 2017, p.237). Such sudden and abrupt changes break the tension and the reader's/receptor's expectations towards the play.

In Part II, dramatic tension is once more present as the family conflicts are updated. In Scene 1 Almerinda is talking to Martim. She says she has heard voices and wants to know with whom he was talking. Martim, who was talking to his lover, lies and says he was arguing with Lurdes. Almerinda is surprised by this revelation. She tells Martim that she bribed Anselmo to let her know about Lurdes' secrets. That is how she came to know that Lazzaro had been found and would soon be home.

Martim behaves as a feudal lord typical, it can be said, of those great landowners, the *coronéis* previously mentioned. He treats his wife without any consideration, humiliating her both physically placing her at his feet, subjecting her to his fancies and emotionally making it clear that they are together, but he has no affection for her.

Martim collects lovers, having affairs both with women from the brothel and women in town. This information is given by one of the laundresses during a conversation. They are talking about the mayor and the third laundress comments: "So much arrogance... But I can swear that Joãozinho and Zé Raimundo, that's for



sure, will turn you in to the man, and proudly" (Silva, 2009, p.97).

When Lurdes arrives with Lazzaro (Orestes), exhausted after having been dragged about town in an endless walk, he sleeps on his sister's lap. Almerinda wants to wake him up. Her daughter repeals her and starts challenging her to tell her crimes before her son. During this argument between the two women Lazzaro pretends to be sleeping and hears Lurdes' account of their father's killing process by being fed a certain amount of ground glass every day mixed into his meals. Lurdes remembers her father and his silence facing the secret of his illness. As a result of such provocation, Almerinda admits her brutal crime but says she planned it alone. Lurdes accuses Martim of being coauthor and of courting other women before her eyes to humiliate her.

Lazzaro pretends to be waking up and his mother goes towards him. They leave arm in arm. After this scene Lazzaro is seen in the living room. He is very restless because of the latest developments. In a long soliloquy he verbalizes all of his dilemmas, uncertainties and suspicions. He breaks up when he faces the certainty that his father was nothing but a stranger to him, just a man in a picture. He refers to the tragic fate when he says: "Why is it written that I am the brother and the son who..." He does not dare finish the sentence. This sentence refers to the Greek culture that admitted that, if a crime were committed, it could be repaired by another. This and Almerinda's confession that she murdered her husband are precedents for her children to kill her to revenge their father and reestablish family honor, discredited by death. This passage evidences Lazzaro's emotional connection to his mother, leaving his father aside, which would show a typical *Oedipus complex* in Freud's definition, with clear consequences for the whole plot and specially its end.

After a long conversation between Lazzaro and Lurdes, their mother joins them. Lazzaro questions her about the identity of the man who lives under that same roof. After deciding that their mother should get married to protect the family's honor, all of them go to bed but are woken up by the noise provoked by Martim's arrival, drunk and out of control, accompanied by a prostitute. Martim tries to make the young woman lie down on the funereal wreaths left there to be taken to the graveyard on the next day – All Souls' Day.



The conflict reaches a climax once the dispute for the home between Lurdes e Almerinda, along the play, becomes clear. They dispute the feminine space, the son and brother (Lazzaro, to whom Lurdes transferred her feelings for her father after his death), and the same man – Rafael de Mendonça, Lurdes' father and Almerinda's husband. The mother blames Lurdes for being abandoned by her husband after she was born. After Rafael's death, a new dispute starts between the two rivals, for Martim, as Lurdes tells her mother, explicitly, that she has an affair with her cousin, the mother's lover. So, revelations are made about incestuous relationships, some proven, some not. The proven relationship is the one between aunt and nephew. The ones hinted at are between father and daughter, and between stepdaughter and stepfather (also cousins).

In an attempt to explain himself to his mother, Lazzaro ends up killing her accidentally, as previously mentioned, and immediately repents. Lurdes asks her brother to leave and tells him she will stay to take responsibility for the crimes. The play ends with the Laundresses chorus saying that "screams will no longer be heard nor will the late Rafael de Mendonça's heels be seen. The criminals will answer for the errors and will be judged for them [...] There are no stains in heaven" (Silva, 2009, p.120).

Final Remarks

In this modern version by Francisco Pereira da Silva, Electra's mythic figure emerges revived, even if the tragic characteristics are kept, as the end maintains the mother's lover's murder and the murder of Almerinda herself.

But the myth's re-reading emphasizes the importance of what is (re)read and, while causing one to think about human existence through a reconfigured myth, this myth lives on and is made eternal as a shadow of the past and an anticipation of the future, even if under a new perspective. Lurdes, the new Electra, makes her journey in a new space and time, taking in her own hand the decisions her brother was meant to make, but which he resigned by reasons previously mentioned, confirmed by re-reading another classic myth, that of Oedipus, in his emotional relationship with his mother, which makes her interdicted for him, the son.



Pereira da Silva actually renovates the original mythic narrative under several aspects, either by taking the plot to the Brazilian Northeast or by mixing it with other classic texts, such as the Biblical passages about Lazarus, name given to the character who is meant to be the main agent of revenge. Although he carries it out, the central dramatic role is given over to his sister, who replaces him.

That is why, as it is our intention to emphasize in the article, “Lazzaro” by Francisco Pereira da Silva is an extremely interesting play because it is universal. Although it is a novice’s work, it evidences a mastery of narrative and creativity to mix different themes, all of which duly renovated and with a new dynamic.

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