

BARBARA ON THE TRAIL OF THE SEVEN DEADLY SINS

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BARBARA NA TRILHA DOS SETE PECADOS CAPITAIS

RESUMO: O presente artigo pretende realizar uma possível leitura do conto "Bárbara", de Murilo Rubião, destacando-se o conceito católico dos pecados capitais expressos pela personagem central da narrativa, e o sentimento de angústia de desespero a que se submete seu marido. Para a teorização, embasa-se em conceitos de Peirce (2019), Simões (2019), Nöth (2024), Agostinho (1980), sobretudo no viés semiótico a que a análise se destina. Na leitura que se pretende, busca-se identificar as sucessivas metáforas que servem de ícone, índice ou símbolo dos pecados capitais. Nesse sentido, o interesse da leitura se debruça na observação do comportamento humano na construção da imagem da personagem protagonista. Sob tal ótica, identificam-se os pecados capitais por meio das atitudes e desejos da protagonista que superam a lógica normal e se opõem às virtudes desejadas pela pessoa amada, como ocorre com o marido.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Semiótica; Murilo Rubião; conto "Bárbara", pecados capitais.

ABSTRACT: This article aims to provide a possible reading of the short story 'Bárbara', by Murilo Rubião, highlighting the Catholic concept of the deadly sins expressed by the central character of the narrative, and the feeling of anguish and despair to which her husband is subjected. The theorizing is based on concepts from Peirce (2019), Simões (2019), Nöth (2024) and Agostinho (1980), especially the semiotic bias that the analysis is aimed at. The aim of this reading is to identify the successive metaphors that serve as icons, indexes or symbols of the deadly sins. In this sense, the interest of the reading focuses on the observation of human behavior in the construction of the protagonist's image. From this perspective, the deadly sins are identified through the protagonist's attitudes and desires that go beyond normal logic and oppose the virtues desired by the person she loves, as is the case with her husband.

*'The man who goes astray
From the path of doctrine,
shall dwell in the assembly
of giants.'* (Proverbs, XXI, 16)

PREAMBLE

With this biblical passage, Murilo Rubião begins the short story of this study, in which the experiences of the protagonist Bárbara are analyzed, drawing a parallel with the deadly sins. These can be seen as the counterpart to virtues - both theological and cardinal - qualities that make up good individuals, such as capitals sins. These can be considered the counterpart of virtues - both theological and cardinal - qualities that make up good individuals, such as humility, generosity and empathy. The emergence and spread of the deadly sins were widely publicized by the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, in the 6th century, as a model to be followed by the so-called 'good Christian'. These sins are avarice, gluttony, envy, wrath, lust, sloth and pride and can give rise to behavior that leads people away from a life based on Christian principles orientated towards/by virtues.

CHARTING THE COURSE

Analyzing a literary page requires choosing a theoretical path that can support the analyst's findings. Considering the fantastic bias present in the collection of short stories - O Pyrotechnic Zacarias - in which the story entitled 'Bárbara' is found, there is an invitation to enter a magical and, in this study, mythical world. This is because the theme character, Bárbara, undergoes extraordinary transformations for ordinary people, thus demonstrating the narrative's magical profile. At the same time, it is possible to lead the reading into a mythical perspective, which includes the biblical text, from which the changes that occur in the character's evolution may represent consequences of the loss of measure to which man is subject when he allows himself to be carried away by the so-called deadly sins.

To support the analysis, elements of Peirce's semiotics and Simões' iconicity are brought to the text, because the short story presents rich semiotic elements, since the character Bárbara manages to submit to the calls of the seven sins. The changes in her behavior, her appearance and her choices bring a profusion of signs to the text that make up a multiple and fantastic scenario. The story, narrated by Bárbara's husband, takes the reader on a frightening journey of his wife.

Here's an extract from the beginning of the story:

Barbara only liked to ask. She would ask and get fat.

As absurd as it sounds, I always found myself willing to fulfil her whims. In return for such constant dedication, I received from her loose tenderness and requests that were continually renewed. I haven't kept them all in my memory, preoccupied with following the growth of her body, which grew larger as her ambition expanded. (RUBIÃO, 1981, p. 29)

In this short excerpt, it is already possible to infer what is to follow, namely Bárbara's insatiable behavior, leading her down the path of sin, which initially materializes through gluttony. That's why she gets frighteningly fat and can't get enough of begging. This is the path we follow when reading the story.

The proposed reading pursues the surreptitious symbolism to be found in the story, starting with the description of the transformations of Bárbara's figure as a result of letting herself be commanded by desires which, in the final analysis, are nothing more than the appeals of the flesh, the deadly sins. These vices are represented not only by behavior, but mainly by the forms acquired by Bárbara throughout her history.

Looking for support in a religious text, we have:

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1866, the capital sins are so called 'because they are generators of other sins and other vices.' In other words, they are like pillars that support many other forms of sin. Each of them has the potential to corrupt our soul, taking us away from the purity and virtues that God desires for us. (My Catholic Library, 2024, p.1)

And following Bárbara's journey, you can see that the character gets caught up in the seven sins, thus creating an extravagant outcome to her story. Let's be clear, however, that the proposed interpretation is not of a religious nature, but a semiotic one, focusing on sins at the level of myths.

SOME THEORY

To begin a brief investigation into signs, it can be said that Rubião's text offers an abundance of signs to be discussed. Although the chosen theme leads interpretation to the symbolic level, icons and indices will be observed as the story unfolds, from which it will be possible to back up the proposal to relate Bárbara's behavior to the seven deadly sins.

Before dealing with the data from a semiotic point of view, it is worth remembering a teaching from the philosopher of Hippo:

Of all these faculties, the most important is the will, which intervenes in all acts of the spirit and constitutes the center of the human personality. The will is essentially creative and free, and it is rooted in the possibility of man moving away from God. However, this means distancing oneself from being and moving towards non-being, in other words, moving towards evil. Herein lies the essence of sin, which is in no way necessary and whose sole culprit is the free will of the human will itself (SANTO AGOSTINHO, 1980, p. 25).

Sin is (...) a transgression of divine law, inasmuch as the soul was created by God to govern the body, and man, misusing his free will, inverts this relationship, subordinating the soul to the body and falling into concupiscence and ignorance'. (SAINT AUGUSTINE, 1980, p. 26)

According to the teachings of the Saint of Hippo, sin is nothing more than the domination of man by his will, by his desire, from which he flees the religious presuppositions aimed at perfection and gives himself over to the pursuit of the fulfilment of desires, regardless of their consequences. And it is precisely the path of human degeneration through desire that will be observed in the analysis of the short story 'Bárbara'.

Still from a philosophical perspective, Abbagnano teaches that:

(...) sin is the intentional transgression of a divine commandment. This term has a mainly religious connotation: sin is not the transgression of a moral or legal norm, but the transgression of a norm considered imposed or established by divinity (ABBAGNANO, 2007, p. 746).

Thus, whether from a religious or philosophical perspective, sin is always a transgression, an act resulting from a deviation in behavior, motivated by an uncontrollable desire. And it is along these lines that the short story 'Bárbara' is analyzed.

Let's look at what semiotics says.

Visiting the writings of Winfried Nöth (2024), we see that Peirce distinguishes between information that symbols imply and information that symbols transmit. All symbols imply information, but only propositional (dicente) symbols can convey information. The information that a symbol implies is the store of knowledge accumulated in it minus the meaning contained in its definition. The information that a symbol conveys is the new knowledge that an interpreter derives from it in the form of a proposition of which it is the subject or predicate. Only symbols, not icons or indices, imply information. According to Peirce's initial theory (1865-68), information is the product of the quantities of meaning and denotation of a symbol.

However, icons can also contain information, since they evoke objects (what they represent) by their qualities, so they bring information about shape, color, dimension, position, etc. Thus, the increase in Bárbara's shapes is an iconic component of the growth of her ambition, her gluttony, her desires, like an addiction, since she asked compulsively, driving her companion to the most risky acts.

Here are a few fragments to prove it:

If only she had diverted some of her affection for the things I gave her to me, or if she hadn't put on so much weight, I wouldn't have cared so much about the sacrifices I made to satisfy her morbid mania. (...) (RUBIÃO, 1981, p. 29)

With this in mind, I took a lot of falls climbing trees, where my companion's eager eyes discovered flavorless fruit or bird's nests. I also took a few beatings from boys whom I was forced to hit just to fulfil one of Bárbara's wishes. And if she returned with a bruised face, she was even happier. She held my head in her hands and was happy to stroke my swollen cheek, as if the bruises were a gift I had given her. (RUBIÃO, 1981, p. 28-29)

Sometimes I was reluctant to acquiesce to her demands, watching her put on weight incessantly. However, my indecision didn't last long. I was overcome by the insistence of her gaze (...) (How tender her eyes were, how convincing she looked when she made such extravagant requests of me!) (RUBIÃO, 1981, p. 30)

It should be noted that the following words and expressions are iconic signs: requests, sacrifices, morbid mania, eager eyes, tasteless fruit, desire, incessant fattening (...). Why iconic? Because they can help the reader construct an image not only of the characters in the story, but also of the scenes narrated.

Drawing up an analysis according to semiotic instructions can give the reader greater security, since the interpretations are based on the forms of the text, they 'don't come out of the hat', as some students often suspect. These are interpretations of signs that are interwoven in the text to represent ideas and thus produce an imagistic impression of the story being told.

Simões provides important information about language as a constant game through which man communicates and interacts with the world. Here's what Simões says in dialogue with the second Wittgenstein: 'Language functions in its uses, so it is not necessary to inquire about the meanings of words, but about their practical functions. These are multiple and varied, constituting multiple languages that are truly forms of life' (SIMÕES, 2019, p. 10).

So, following Wittgenstein's instructions, the ascertainment of the meaning of words and expressions must emerge from the context in which they are inserted. The dictionary values are just a starting point for delving into the values constructed within the texts.

THE SINS OF GLUTTONY AND PRIDE

Returning to Bárbara's initial behavior, based on what she asked for, ate and gained weight, the sin of gluttony stands out. According to Houaiss (s.u.), some meanings for gluttony are: 1. *addiction to eating and drinking in excess; gluttony*; 2. *irresistible attraction to sweets and fine delicacies; gulodice, gulosaria*; 3. *fig. burning desire; greediness*.

According to the scenes narrated, Barbara's gluttony went beyond food and reached other areas of the brain where burning desire (lust and pride) and greed were located, from which Barbara's requests became unhealthy, and her companion was unable to get rid of them except by fulfilling her desires.

Moving on to the indices, we'll see that the text is also very rich in indices, because in describing not only the behavior of the main character, but especially his appearance, Rubião offers the reader many indicators of the unfolding of the text's ideas.

Let's read another extract:

There was a time - yes, there was - when I got tough and threatened to abandon her at the first request she received.

To a certain extent, my warning had the desired effect. Barbara retreated into an aggressive mutism and refused to eat or talk to me. (...) Her body was wasting away, while her belly was growing alarmingly.

Suspicious that my wife's lack of requests might favor the appearance of a new kind of phenomenon, I was terrified. The doctor reassured me. That immense belly only announced one child.

My naïve hopes led me to believe that the birth of the child would eliminate Barbara's strange manias once and for all. And suspecting that her thinness and pallor were harbingers of a serious illness, I was afraid that if she fell ill, her child would die in her womb. Before that happened, I begged her to ask for something.

She asked for the ocean.' (RUBIÃO, 1981, p. 30)

These fragments contain relevant indices: aggressive mutism; her body was wasting away; her belly was growing frighteningly.

Mutism is seen as the denial of something, in this case, it is supposed to be the denial of change. When her body wastes away, it implies the presence of another sin: pride. By having her requests forbidden, Bárbara imposes herself through her thinness, which acts as an index of her revolt. As for the growth of her womb, we initially hypothesized that new ideas, new requests were being gestated there; and the fact that she is pregnant seems to suggest that, as well as a child, something else could be growing inside Bárbara.

It's worth remembering that indices, unlike icons, don't provide qualitative references to the object, but rather produce deciphering clues. According to Simões, 'In Derrida's philosophical language, we could say that the sign is not a presence, that is, the "thing" or the "concept" is not present in the sign, it is a trace' (SIMÕES, 2019, p. 23). This reiterates the idea of the trail attributed to indices. For example, a road map doesn't represent the roads themselves, but simulates, through its layout, the routes available (or not). A toothpaste advertisement promises teeth whitening, but the whiteness will be materialized iconically in the teeth, while the toothpaste will be a mere index of the possibility of whitening.

THE SIN OF AVARICE

In the story in question, Barbara's companion gets caught up in his wife's eccentric requests and, when she asks for the ocean, he sets off on a long journey to the coast. Fearing that the size of the ocean might cause Barbara to get fat again, he chooses to bring her a small bottle containing ocean water. In this passage, it is possible to identify the relevance of icons and indices. The size of the ocean is iconic and relates to Barbara's previous state of being absurdly fat. However, the bottled water brought by her companion is only an index of the fact that he went to the ocean, but didn't bring it for her, only a sample.

Contrary to what the man had expected, the indexical sign of the ocean became something of a talisman for Barbara. She joyfully took the glass from my hands and stared in amazement at the liquid it contained. She would sleep with the little bottle between her arms and, when she woke up, she would put it against the light and taste some of the water. In the meantime, she put on weight.' (RUBIÃO, 1981, p. 30). In this passage of the story, we can see the emergence of the sin of avarice, since the protagonist appropriates the little bottle of water, making it impossible for anyone else to get close to it.

At this point in the story, what is known as an upside-down index manifests itself. From the size of Bárbara's belly, the man assumed that a giant would be born to him and that his problems would increase with 'a very fat woman and a monstrous son, who might also inherit his mother's obsession with asking for things' (RUBIÃO, 1981, p. 31). However, a stunted child had been born whom she ignored, refusing to feed him despite having voluminous breasts full of milk, which represents exactly the index in reverse - a sign that leads to a clue that is denied by the result. It's therefore a reversal of expectation, and the text speaks of lots of milk and no food for the baby, as well as a huge belly and a small baby. Semiotically speaking, there is a reverse effect in the indication coming from an index, as Bárbara's huge belly was pointed out, resulting in the birth of a stunted child, for example. Refusing to breastfeed her own child would also be an index of avarice: 'she refused to give him her large breasts full of milk' (RUBIÃO, 1981, p. 31).

THE SINS OF ENVY AND ANGER

But Barbara's desires never ceased. Once she'd had enough of seawater, she decided to ask for a baobab tree. Her neighbor had a baobab tree. This is the index of envy.

The husband, convinced that Barbara's wish was coming true, waited for night, jumped over the wall and plucked a branch from the neighbor's baobab tree. But when he handed the gift to his wife, she called him an idiot and spat in his face, saying he hadn't asked for a branch. Her reaction denotes the sin of anger, thus continuing his journey through the deadly sins.

A few days later, as he couldn't buy the tree from his neighbor, the poor man had to buy the whole property at an exorbitant price and hire some men who uprooted the tree and brought it crashing to the ground. Barbara began to walk on the thick trunk or draw pictures and write names on it.

When the tree withered, she lost interest. Her husband then took her to the cinema and football grounds. There she demanded the ball, with which he had to interrupt the game. How much embarrassment this man suffered!

It's worth noting that each request had a symbolic, indicative or iconic value, respectively: the ocean, the baobab, the ship, as a symbol of power and greed; the water bottle as an index of possession; the huge belly, as an icon of gluttony, of exacerbated desires.

THE SINS OF PRIDE, LUST AND SLOTH

In Dasa, Kṛṣṇa says that 'lust, born out of passion, turns into anger when unsatisfied'. It serves as a 'gateway' leading to other sins, since it is related to possession and greed, two characteristics present in avarice. 'Lust can also cause a feeling of superiority, which eventually leads to the cardinal sin of pride' (DAS, p. 34-39).

Then a new and terrible desire arose: Barbara wanted a ship.

The grandeur of the baobab was extinguished by the tree's death. So another symbol had to be found to represent Barbara's pride. Here's the dialogue: '- I'd be so happy if I had a ship! / - But we'll be poor, dear. We won't have enough to buy food, and the boy will starve to death. / - Never mind the boy, we'll have a ship, which is the most beautiful thing in the world' (RUBIÃO, 1981, p. 32).

It should be noted that pride is manifested by the desire to demonstrate power by possessing huge things (ocean, baobab, ship). At the same time, lust is present in the form of coveting material goods and yearning for sensual pleasures (Houaiss, s.u). Bárbara's insatiable behavior demonstrates something of an erotic relationship between her and the things she demands from her husband. This couple's relationship is realized in an extravagant way, as she is driven to enjoyment by her partner, based on the things she demands.

Her lust materialized in the acquisition of an ocean liner, bought by her husband in spite of her financial hardship resulting from successive acquisitions. Hunger struck, but Bárbara couldn't lose any weight: 'Her excessive obesity meant that she couldn't get into the berths and her walks were limited to the deck, where she had difficulty getting around.' (RUBIÃO, 1981, p. 33). Meanwhile, her husband 'stole pieces of wood or iron from the liner and exchanged them for food' (RUBIÃO, 1981, p. 33).

Because of her difficulty in getting around, Bárbara fell prey to the sin of laziness, as she could do almost nothing due to her difficulty in getting around.

One night, her husband saw Barbara staring at the sky, and he realized that she was looking at the moon. He hurried over to where she was and used his best arguments, trying to divert her attention. Seeing that his words had no effect, he tried unsuccessfully to pull her by the arms. The woman's heavy body wouldn't allow him to drag her.

Frightened and disorientated, not knowing what to do, he leaned against the rail and waited for a final request, as no one else would hold her back. 'But after a few minutes, I breathed a sigh of relief. He didn't ask for the moon, but for a tiny star, almost invisible beside him. I went to get it' (RUBIÃO, 1981, p. 33).

A POSSIBLE CONCLUSION

The journey of Bárbara and her husband is an important semiotic exercise, through which it becomes possible to analyze icons, indices and symbols that trace the itinerary of the characters' journey along the trail of the seven deadly sins.

The main symbol is Bárbara's extremely bulky figure. A victim of morbid obesity (life-threatening obesity), the protagonist's body size, which is iconic, increases as her requests expand. Therefore, the icons are lined up from the volume of Bárbara's body to her extravagant requests: ocean, baobab, ship...

As for the indices, we can highlight the growth of Bárbara's belly - an index of her insatiability - and the birth of a rickety baby - an index of the woman's lack of interest in her child.

The sins are lined up - gluttony, pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust and sloth - one by one, as Barbara's desires take over. Each wish fulfilled has a short-lived effect and gives way to a new wish, always more extravagant and difficult to fulfil.

The husband's obsession with fulfilling Barbara's wishes has led him to financial bankruptcy, to the point where he can no longer afford to buy food. The child became more and more stunted. Bárbara became larger and larger. And his wife's sudden silence made her husband alert to a supposed new request. Barbara's contemplative position, as she stared at the sky, led the man to assume that this time she wanted the moon. So he tried to dissuade her and was surprised by her manifest desire to obtain a 'tiny, almost invisible star' next to the moon.

Surprising the reader, Bárbara's husband says: 'I went to get it!' (RUBIÃO, 1981, p. 33).

It should be noted that Bárbara's behavior is at once iconic, indicative and symbolic. They are iconic not only because of the size of the desired objects, but also because of the described forms of the characters; they are indicative because they suggest the unfolding of the story, leading the reader to try and guess the next course of action, especially that of Bárbara's husband, who doesn't stop in his quest to fulfil his wife's desires; and finally, there are the symbols that end up materializing the seven sins.

Another curiosity that hasn't gone unnoticed is the onomastic issue. The protagonist is called Bárbara, which, as well as being an orthonym, can also be an inflected adjective of barbarian (1. who or which is cruel, inhuman, ferocious 2. who does not share the same culture - Houaiss, s. u.). It can be inferred, then, that the choice of the character's name was not random, and there is not enough space to extend this analysis; however, it should be noted here that this fact was observed.

Parodying Guimarães Rosa, 'the story was put on the record!'

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