Family Ties Study Guide

Family Ties by Clarice Lispector

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Introduction

"Family Ties" is the title story of Clarice Lispector's *Lacos de Familia* (*Family Ties*). A play on the word "ties" suggests the tension of the story, between the ties that connect and the ties that bind one to family members. Like many of the other stories in the collection, "Family Ties" concerns men and women who, when faced with a moment of epiphany in their relations with others, tragically choose not to communicate openly, but to perpetuate a sense of alienation within family bonds. The story concerns a woman, Catherine, who is relieved when her mother departs after a visit, because their relationship is strained and artificial. They cannot reach each other emotionally and fear doing so. They ignore the deepest part of their feelings for each other, since both hate and love reside there. Almost in retaliation for her own imprisonment, Catherine begins the process of re-creating the same bonds with her young son at the end of the story. She has learned the nature of her anguish from a moment of epiphany, yet rather than right this wrong, she commits it to her son's legacy. The phenomenological narrative style of the story was a landmark in Brazilian literature, opening the door to experimentation with form and language. Clarice Lispector's fiction spans the modern and postmodern eras, representing the human mind in an eloquent and fluid style and probing metaphysical questions of being, identity, and language. This is a story that does not preach, but that exposes essential and tragic human qualities in a quiet, haunting way.

Author Biography

Clarice Lispector, the youngest of three daughters, was born in Tchetchelnik, Ukraine, to Ukrainian parents on December 10, 1920. At the time the family was en route to Brazil, where they lived first in Alagoas, then Recife, and finally in Rio de Janeiro. The year of her birth has been established only recently, since Lispector routinely lied about her age, either from feminine modesty or to give the illusion of having been an early blooming writer. Thus her birth year is variously cited as 1920, 1921, 1924, and 1925, depending upon the date of the publication. Her mother, Marieta, was paralyzed during Clarice's childhood and died when Clarice was nine. Her father, Pedro, could not afford to buy the books that he and his daughters loved, so Clarice made use of the local library. She was a good student, and one of the very few women to earn a secondary degree in law in Brazil in the 1950s. During and after law school she also worked as a reporter and news agency editor. She married a fellow law student, Mauro Gurgel Valente, and accompanied him on his diplomatic journeys to Italy in 1944, during the end of World War II. Being a Jew in Mussolini's Italy, Lispector refrained from commenting in her letters or her journal about the political climate she found in Europe. In fact, Lispector, like Jorge Borges, whose work she read and admired, went against the grain of contemporary writing in her native land and usually avoided political commentary. The couple lived in Europe until 1949 and then in the United States from 1952 until 1960. During these years away from Brazil, Lispector experimented with short stories and produced two more novels. After divorcing her husband in 1959, she and their two sons returned to Rio de Janeiro.

As a student, Lispector had begun to write stories and to send them to newspapers to be published, and she served as editor of the school newspaper. Her first published work, *Perto do Coraca Selvagem* (1943) [*Near to the Savage Heart*], was an autobiographical novel, for which she was awarded Brazil's Graca Aranha Prize. Her fourth and most acclaimed novel, *A Paixao Segundo G. H.* [*The Passion According to G. H.*] was published in 1964, after she returned to Rio de Janeiro. Her prevalent themes of gender, imprisonment, psychology, existential metaphysics, and their relationship to language appear from her earliest writings. In the midst of writing a confessional treatise on the creative relationship between writing and life in 1977, *Um sopro de vida* [*A Breath of Life*], Lispector died of cancer. This last work was published posthumously in 1978.

When she once visited Clarice Lispector's home in Rio de Janeiro to conduct an interview, Elizabeth Lowe reported being "struck by the great number of portraits that stared out from every wall of the room with the eerie effect of fragmenting my perception of the author as she stood in front of me." The interviewer's observation seems a fitting tribute to Lispector's obsession with perception, introspection, and identity, which drove her to write haunting and evocative prose throughout her life. She is credited with changing the course of Brazilian literature by opening up new possibilities in narrative style with her existentialist stories and novels.

Plot Summary

The story opens with a mother and daughter in a taxi on the way to the train station for the mother's departure, after a visit to her married daughter's family. The daughter, Catherine, is relieved that the tensions of the visit will soon end. She had nearly laughed aloud at her husband's discomfort when her mother made a general and insincere-sounding apology for her comments, which apparently mostly centered on the couple's "thin and highly strung" son. Tony, suffering from a cold, had hidden behind a cough rather than respond meaningfully to his mother-in-law. In the taxi ride, both women have the sense of something left unsaid, and they ask each other what they may have forgotten, but keep the conversation on the relatively safe topic of the child. Their composure is momentarily shaken when the taxi driver slams on the brakes and the two women briefly collide. They rearrange the suitcases and handbags quickly, to avoid the sense of "physical intimacy long since forgotten." Catherine had had a closer relationship with her father, and she is anxious to be away from her mother. Only when the train lurches away do they call out to each other, "Mother" and "Catherine," and when the daughter sees her mother's tremulous hand adjusting the hat she had bought at Catherine's milliner's shop, she has a sudden urge to ask her if she had had a happy marriage with her father.

Having never made the connections both women longed for and feared, they are parted, and Catherine walks with her usual brisk step, now that she no longer has to keep pace with her aging mother. She feels beautiful and fixes her pleasure on "the things of the world." Catherine heads straight for her own son, after answering yes to her husband's terse query, "Has *she* gone?" The child is a distant and preoccupied young thing, four years old. She finds him playing with a wet towel, and feels a sudden desire to "fasten the child forever to this moment." As she hangs up the towel, the child calls her "Mummy," in a way he hadn't before, without following it with some kind of request. Not understanding why, Catherine enjoys the moment, and bursts into a wheezing laugh, which the child promptly pronounces "ugly." Now Catherine is more than ever determined to attach him to her. She brusquely gathers him up and spirits him to the elevator, telling her surprised husband they are going for a walk. Coughing and blowing his nose from his cold, Tony does not have time to respond or to stop them, even though he feels left out.

Tony watches the pair from the height of the apartment window, seeing them now as "flattened," without their familiar perspective. The child's hair blows in the breeze of the nearby sea. A fear grips Tony that his wife might transmit something□at first he does not know what□to his son. "Catherine, this child is still innocent," he thinks. He realizes that it is imprisonment that she will transmit, and that she will impose it with a "morose pleasure." He foresees how the child will stand by the same window and be imprisoned, "obliged to respond to a dead man." Tony feels alone in the efficient apartment his engineering job has provided for his family. They have escaped him to form a bond he will not join. He realizes that beneath her serenity, Catherine hates him and what they have achieved, as a family as well as economically, but he also knows that he is bound to perpetuate both. He sees their petulant child as excised from the safe life Catherine

and he have fashioned; the child is the expression of irritation and frustration that they refuse to express to each other.

Tony's thoughts turn to dinner, the return of routine, and he decides to go to the cinema after dinner, to bide the time until dark, when "this day would break up like the waves on the rocks of Arpoador." Tony just barely acknowledges the irritating sound of the elevator coming up, bearing his family. Either the noise or the idea of its not stopping "even for a second" seems to remind him how little control he has over his family's progression toward eternal imprisonment.

Summary

"Family Ties" is Clarice Lispector's short story of family dynamics and the ties which simultaneously draw together and bind too tight. The main characters in the story are Catherine, a thirty-two-year old woman, and her mother Severina. Catherine's husband Tony and their child are the only other characters.

Catherine accompanies her mother in a taxi on the way to the train station. Severina's two-week visit with her daughter and her family has come to an end, and the awkward mannerisms of the two women make it obvious that the visit has been a strained one. In order to make conversation, Severina repeatedly checks her two suitcases and wonders if she has forgotten anything. Catherine answers that Severina has not forgotten anything.

Catherine recalls the departure scene between Severina and Tony, who has found it difficult to have his mother-in-law in his home for two weeks. Now that the moment has arrived for Severina to leave, both mother-in-law and son-in-law show earnest consideration for the other's health and overall appreciation for the time spent during the past two weeks. Tony is grateful for a cold that allows him to cough instead of answering when Severina declares her feelings for him.

Catherine is jolted back to the present by Severina's statement that Catherine's child is too thin and highly-strung. Catherine validates her mother's statement in order to avoid any discussion or arguments about her child. Severina wonders aloud once more if she has forgotten anything, and the taxi brakes suddenly throwing the suitcases into disarray and propelling mother and daughter against each other in the seat. Handbags and suitcases are quickly righted, and the women awkwardly look at each other, realizing that it has been many years since they have come in physical contact.

Catherine mind is thrown back to the time when she was a girl. She remembers that she was always closer to her father, never embracing or kissing her mother. This incident in the taxi just exaggerates the lack of closeness between mother and daughter, and both women are anxious to reach the train station.

Once more, Severina wonders if she has forgotten anything, and this time, Catherine does not answer. Catherine returns Severina's gloves, which had fallen to the floor, and the two women do not interact again until Severina's luggage has been loaded onto the train, when they share a goodbye kiss.

Severina's discomfort at not knowing what else to say expresses itself in the repeated adjustment of a new hat she is wearing. It is only when the train begins to move that Severina and Catherine look longingly at each other. Once more, Severina voices her hope that she has not forgotten anything, and Catherine yearns for something more endearing or of more substance. The train pulls away, and Catherine can only wave.

Catherine regains her composure and walks at her normal brisk pace, something she has not been able to do with her mother the past two weeks. Aware that she is still an attractive woman, Catherine walks from the station back to her apartment, well aware of the male attention she receives along the way. Catherine wants to provide the impression that she is a secure woman who embraces life and knows exactly what it is that she wants.

Returning to the apartment, Catherine greets her husband, who is glad to have privacy restored to their home, especially today, because he spends each Saturday in quiet reflection. Catherine looks in on their child, who is playing with a wet towel, and she engages in the game with him. Suddenly the boy, who is delayed in his learning and speech, says the word "Mummy" in a way he has never done before.

Catherine finds the situation to be funny and laughs in a wheezing style that prompts the boy to call her ugly. Although far from an ideal form of communication, Catherine is encouraged by her son's word and feels the desperate need to strengthen the tenuous bond. Catherine whisks her son out of the apartment with just a quick statement to Tony that that she and the boy are going out for awhile.

In spite of Tony's need for solitude on Saturdays, he feels somehow abandoned and alienated from his wife and son in a way he cannot explain. Tony watches the two from the apartment window, and he senses a fear that Catherine might impart something to the child that will end his innocence. Soon it occurs to Tony that he fears Catherine will transmit a sense of imprisonment to the boy.

Tony can project years into the future, when his own son will stand at this window burdened with the obligations of attending his parents. In spite of the comfortable life Tony's career as an engineer has provided, he knows that he will never be able to give Catherine what she really needs or wants. Now, the boy will be able to do what he cannot.

Tony is helpless to alter the situation and turns his thoughts to Catherine's return and the idea that they may go to the cinema after dinner. After that, this pivotal day will be over and crash into pieces, as the waves do on the rocks of Arpoador.

Analysis

The author uses the omniscient point of view to tell the story, although it switches from Catherine's view at the beginning to Tony's view at the end. This means that the reader can understand Catherine's actions as well as her thoughts and feelings. Normally, a point of view will stay consistent throughout a story, but Lispector chooses to transfer the perspective to Tony at the end so that the story closes with Tony's thoughts.

The author also uses the technique of repetition throughout the story to drive home a point. During the taxi ride and Severina's departure at the train station, she nervously questions whether or not she has forgotten anything. The rhythm and pacing of this question adds to the building tension in the story until Catherine is unable to reply.

The question about forgetting something is also symbolic in that it is clear that Severina has forgotten to love Catherine and to establish a strong bond. Ironically, Severina tends her suitcases and gloves more closely than she does her own daughter sitting next to her.

Using the techniques of foreshadowing, Lispector gives the character of Tony a cold so that he cannot communicate properly with the departing Severina. Tony's coughing and blowing his nose also prevents his stopping Catherine from leaving the house with their son at the end of the story. This common illness is symbolic of barriers between people, and it also becomes symbolic for the lack of communication restricting this family.

Unfortunately, the author does not provide much hope for this family at the end, and the symbolic family ties that created tension between Catherine and Severina have not transferred to Catherine and her son, whose bond will both bind them and control them.

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Characters

Catherine

Catherine is a serene thirty-two-year-old woman who has a distant relationship with her mother, husband, and four-year-old son. She is "modern" and pretty, slightly plump, with short hair tinted reddish brown, and a slight squint. With her husband, Catherine lives tranquilly if not happily, refusing to break the peace with the kind of talk that could lead to intimacy. With her mother, she maintains a safe distance, even though she longs, in a way, to ask her intimate questions such as whether she was happy with her father. To Catherine, "'mother and daughter' means 'life and repugnance.'" She is filled with relief after her mother leaves, but the lingering sense of a connection drives her to build the same neurotic and imprisoning relationship with her tiny son.

The Child

"Thin and highly strung," the child, whose name is not given, speaks "as if verbs were unknown to him" and "observe[s] things coldly, unable to connect them among themselves." His mind is always "somewhere else." When his mother laughs in a wheezing way at his calling her "Mummy," it prompts him to pronounce his mother "ugly." He has no attachment to his family, but Catherine is about to forge one.

Severina

Severina, Catherine's mother, adopts a tone of "challenge and accusation" with Tony that is really directed at her daughter. She pronounces their son "too thin" and waits until the day of her departure to apologize, in an offhand and general way, for her harsh treatment of her son-in-law. Severina is an old woman, wrinkled, with dentures, but with the silly vanity of a hat that falls over her eyes when the train lurches forward. The hat, "bought from the same milliner patronized by her daughter," was a futile and misguided attempt at intimacy as well as a form of advertisement of her stylishness to the other train passengers. The unsaid words, "I am your mother," haunt her parting with Catherine. Severina, looking like a madonna, is most vulnerable when the train moves off and it is too late for her to repair the damage of her mothering of Catherine.

Tony

"A slightly built man with a dark complexion," Catherine's husband has a slight cold, which he uses to mask his discomfort around his motherin- law. His having a cold is a metaphor for all of the family relations: sickness, self-absorption, and fragility. He is an engineer who has provided well for his family and who on typical Saturdays "pursued his private occupation" of reading. Tony realizes that when Catherine takes their son for a walk, she is beginning to build that tight bond between mother and child that will

imprison the young boy just as he was imprisoned by his own mother and Catherine by her mother, yet Tony can do no more than think to himself, "Catherine, this child is still innocent." He cannot move himself to follow them or to stop her, but stands looking wistfully out the window at them walking away from him. He takes refuge in the thought of going to the cinema with his family after dinner, a way of passing the evening safely and quickly, with no threat of intimacy.

Themes

Existentialism

Existentialism is a philosophy that places tremendous responsibility on humans, because it posits no meaning to life except that which each person makes of it. The existentialists (Sartre, Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Jaspers, Camus) in their various formulations of this philosophy of being (ontology), either deny the existence of God or point out that because God does not reveal the purpose of life, the consequence for humankind is the same as if God did not exist. With no purpose in life, each human is totally free□but also totally responsible for his or her own actions. The meaninglessness of existence coupled with ultimate responsibility causes angst, a physical and emotional rejection of an unwelcome truth. Life is absurd, and humans shrink in horror from its absurdity and fear to take responsibility to create themselves. How does one decide how to live, how to create oneself in a meaningless world? Jean-Paul Sartre, the "father of existentialism," coined the term to describe the creation of the self as a necessary reaction to awareness of the existence of others: "I see *myself* because *somebody* sees me." Without others to remind one of one's existence, a person's state of mind is simply "unreflective consciousness," an inert state. Being aware of the presence of others is a reminder that the world, meaningless as it is, cannot be escaped. Being seen by another does not result in morality, however, since each person is alone in creating a self and a purpose in life. The presence of others only serves to remind one of one's own existence, and of the other's freedom, not of any particular moral code. Sartre explains in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), "*nothing*, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value, this or that particular scale of values." The loneliness of mutual but unconnected co-existence is described in Sartre's novel *Nausea*, where a couple cannot sustain their relationship in the face of the absurdity of life. As depressing as existentialism may seem, there is a way out of its prison of absurdity. Sartre describes the "man of good faith" as one who fully governs his life responsibly, even though no moral consequences exist. The "man of bad faith" harms himself and others through hypocrisy or selfishness, or by withdrawing from the world. Thus existentialists find it crucial to make responsible choices. Another way to fight against absurdity and nausea is to create. In a world without values, the freedom to create one's own meaning can be liberating, at least to those with the strength of character to face the responsibility implied in the creative act or gesture. The narrator of *Nausea* overcomes his despair by imagining he will write a perfect novel, a redeeming act of creativity.

One of the hallmarks of the existentialist writer is to probe the consciousness, searching for understanding of oneself, and exposing self-contradictions, in an attempt to achieve total honesty. The self, because it is always creating itself, is always in flux and thus always in need of re-evaluation. Clarice Lispector (who had read Sartre and loved Dostoyevsky) shares the existentialist concern for soul-searching and responsibility. Her writing surveys her character's fluid consciousness, moving from one thought to another, without fixing or defining her character definitively through assertion, using a

combination of deliberate vagueness and specificity. Giovanni Pontiero in his translator's introduction to *Family Ties* says that "Clarice Lispector shares the Sartrean conviction that we are not content to live. We need to know who we are, to understand our nature, and to express it. Her vision of reality gives identity to being and nothingness and satisfies the need 'to speak of that which obliges us to be silent.'"

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a philosophy centered on psychological processes. It concerns the way that objects are perceived or registered in the consciousness. Edmund Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, sought to make of it a science that would give philosophy the same status as the sciences of psychology and math. Therefore, he posited not only the philosophy, but a way of approaching it. Since phenomenology involves only the registering of objects in the mind, it is necessary to "bracket out" any preconceived notions, inferences, or valuations of the object. In phenomenology, the only acceptable emotive or intellectual process is the notion of "intention" which comprises the conceptualization of the object and empathic response to it. The world and the self are thus constructed through the subjective human consciousness. There are several implications for writing implicit in a phenomenological approach. One is the necessity to describe consciousness as a temporal flow that moves from one encounter with objects to the next, incorporating the past, present, and future. Such accounts would tend to be first-person accounts, bordering on solipsism, or self-centeredness. Given this personal point of view, the individual's history of experiences affects or molds the possible "horizon of meanings" that a given object will summon up in the mind. While objects and the world exist independently, they can only be perceived through the consciousness, and thus any description of the world and its objects is necessarily subjective and idiosyncratic.

Clarice Lispector has been called a phenomenological writer and thinker due to her obsession with portraying the ever-changing consciousness. As she has explained, her approach is to let her own thoughts flow freely: "When writing I have insights that are 'passive' and so intimate that they *write themselves* the very instant I perceive them without the intervention of any so-called thought process." In other words, Lispector tries to "bracket out" her editorial mind as she writes, in an attempt to reproduce the actual flow of her own consciousness.

Feminism

Existentialism has a particular importance to women, as shown by Simone de Beauvior, Sartre's life partner. If, according to existential philosophy, each person constantly recreates herself in reaction to awareness of the other, then women are doubly subjected, because of oppression by male others who use women, and their power over women, as a means to define themselves. De Beauvoir explains, "Woman. . .finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the Other." Existential feminism does not place the burden of female identity solely on males,

however, but recognizes female complicity in the formation of woman's gender identity. Women are compliant to their own oppression to the extent that they accept their subordinate role and to the extent that they create their own identity as a subordinate identity. Feminism is the study of the construction of gender identities and the impact these identities have on women's lives and writing. If, as Sartre had shown, writing is a creative outlet for working out problems of identity, then women's writing can be an act of subversion against oppression. According to feminist critic Elaine Showalter, feminist criticism is concerned with "woman as the producer of textual meaning, with the history, themes, genres, and structures of literature by women. Its subjects include the psychodynamics of female creativity; linguistics and the problem of a female language; the trajectory of the individual or collective female literary career; literary history; and, of course, studies of particular writers and works."

Clarice Lispector was not a feminist in the political sense, but her work has been appropriated by numerous feminist critics, most notably Helene Cixous, who reads into Lispector's fiction her own feminist viewpoint. In Cixous' hands, Lispector becomes a feminist who portrays "libidinal economies" by recounting which sexual energies are invested in and which are not. Cixous sees Lispector as a writer who recognizes and exposes her own complicity in the creation of a subordinate female identity, and who, at the same time, mildly subverts male authority through writing. Cixous dissects Lispector's stories and novels and reconstitutes them as evidence supporting her own feminist philosophy, a process for which she has been criticized. Maria Jose Barbosa, another feminist critic, sees Lispector's work as empowering language "to combat discourses that seek to dominate and corrode women's power as authors and as subjects within Brazilian culture." However, Lispector quite consciously avoided writing with political intent, feminist or otherwise, a move of departure from the mainstream of Brazilian literature in the 1960s when the full-length work *Family Ties* was published. It is doubtful that Lispector would identify herself as a feminist, either in the 1960s political sense of the word or in the current linguistic/ semiotic/ontological sense of it as expressed by Cixous. Although she said that the status of the Brazilian woman "still leaves much to be desired; she is enslaved," her writing is more focused on human consciousness and the perils of intimacy than on the politics or semiotics of gender.

Style

Point of View

Point of view, as defined by C. Hugh Holman and William Harmon in *A Handbook to Literature, 6th edition* (1992), is "the vantage point from which an author presents a story." The vantage point takes into account several aspects, including the narrator's physical perspective (what she or he sees, as a camera would take it in), the narrator's emotional perspective (mood) and the narrator's related social or relational perspective (attitude toward what is seen). Thus a narrator will record physical observations of items seen, such as a hat, and the vantage point from which it is seen, on another character's head. The narrator would also speak of this item in a certain mood, which could be happy, as expressed in ornate or playful description, or miserable, as expressed in a flat tone and sparsely worded description. Finally, the narrator's reaction to the item as, for example, threatening or congenial, will also be evident. One may also speak of the focalization of a work. Focalization is formed by the triad of the narrating agent (who tells), the narrator's perspective (the vantage point), and the focalized (what is seen). The narrating agent may be omniscient, and be able to read the thoughts of the characters; a restricted omniscient narrator can only read one character's thoughts. Lispector employs a restricted omniscient point of view in "Family Ties," but the perspective shifts after the first twothirds of the story is told. It begins from the restricted perspective of Catherine, telling what she observes as well as what she thinks. Then after Catherine takes their son for a walk, the story is told from Tony's viewpoint, with his thoughts and observations narrated. The narration is "restricted" in the sense that only one viewpoint is treated at a time. If the narration described thoughts from both Catherine and Tony (as well as Severina) at the same time, the point of view would be unrestrictedly omniscient.

Motif

A motif is a recurring image, phrase, or device that enhances the meaning of a story. Often, the motif takes on symbolic importance as part of the story's theme. For example, the Bible contains motifs of light and dark imagery as well as the devices of the prodigal son and the messiah, and these important elements contribute to the meaning of Biblical stories. A motif can be a seemingly minor detail that is repeated in a meaningful way, or it can be a commonly occurring story event around which the story coheres. In "Family Ties," the motif of the window repeatedly occurs as an image that both separates and also joins family members. Another motif is that of departure, as symbolized by the taxi, train, and elevator. There is also a subtle motif in the form of the "gaze," which can border on tender, as when Catherine notices her mother's tremulous hand as she adjusts her hat, or hostile, as when Catherine watches the fumbled apology of her mother to her husband, or it can be fearful, as when Tony watches his wife take their son away for a walk. In all cases, the gaze is impotent, yet judging. The central, organizing motif is that of the relationship between mother and child, first

exemplified in the tension between Catherine and her mother, and then the regeneration of that tense bond between Catherine and her young son. The motif of insects or a swarm of them appears just once in "Family Ties" in a brief allusion to moths around the dinner table, but is a common one in the other stories of the collection *Family Ties* and in other Lispector stories and novels.

Historical Context

The 1960s in Brazil

Brazil is a country whose economy has been largely dependent upon the world price of coffee. It did not obtain independence from Portugal until 1822, and coffee has carried the economy for the fledgling nation ever since, even though Brazil has recently diversified both its agricultural and its service products. Brazil was the only South American country to send troops to Europe to fight the Axis powers in World War II, having had the resources as well as a percentage of expatriate Europeans to encourage participation. The economy accelerated under relatively stable leadership during the late 1950s and very early 1960s. In 1960, President Juscelino Kubitschek established Brasilia as the new national capital in an effort to shift economic strength to the geographic center of Brazil. Clarice Lispector wrote several *cronicas* (chronicles) in the news applauding Brasilia and its architecture. In 1964, a military coup attempted to control the nation's political unrest (between communist, democratic, and republican supporters) and to ease economic uncertainty, but the move initiated twenty years of military rule and a reign of police terror against those seeking political reform.

Although women in Brazil had received political equity with the right to vote in 1937, they still struggled in the 1960s to shrug off the myth of the tanned, exotic, and willing female from the tropics. In Brazil as in other countries, women did not find equality in the job market and their status was reinforced through sexual stereotyping. Lispector was unusual in having completed a law degree in the 1950s and in having been the first female journalist at a major news agency. Lispector's stories do not actively engage in a critique of gender politics, but portray the urban Brazilian woman as imprisoned by her own inertia as well as by society. In a 1979 interview, Lispector said that the status of the Brazilian woman "still leaves much to be desired; she is still enslaved."

Modernist and Postmodern Literature Movements

The Week of Modern Art of 1922 in Sao Paulo, Brazil, set off a modernist movement among the literati of Brazil that would last for fully fifty years, with a galvanizing effect on artists and writers comparable to the effect of the Impressionist Exhibit of 1874 on Paris. On one hand it introduced the art of Cubism, while on the hand other it inspired an interest in Brazil's folkloric history and native arts. A new artistic movement was spawned whose artists wanted to infuse their art with "light, air, ventilators, airplanes, workers' demands, idealism, motors, factory smokestacks, blood, speed, dream," according to Brazilian poet Menotti del Pichia. Marxist and naturalist writers such as Jorge Amado and Graciliano Ramos wrote of the poverty and hardships of the barren northeast region of Brazil, setting a tone of political and social purpose in Brazilian literature. The 1960s was a period of literary "Boom" in all of Latin America, including Brazil. Modernism represented a break with traditional forms of writing, which had included romantic socialism, realism, and regionalism. The "new" literature of Brazil was

cosmopolitan, stylish, poetic, and "arty." Brazilian writers such as Mario Raul de Morais Andrade wrote of the urbanity of Sao Paulo, and Jorge Amado elevated the folkloric form to art. Clarice Lispector is often included among modernist writers because of her interest in consciousness and the poetic quality of her prose.

The postmodern movement was slower to come in Brazil. Postmodernist writing self-consciously exposes the act of writing itself, which involves a rejection of standard forms of plot and character and the idea of the "death of the author" in a world of literary "exhaustion," where every story has been told. Postmodernists attempt to capture the illusory or relative quality of meaning through "playing with" narrative schemes, language, and genre. The focus therefore is on formal properties of writing and the act of writing itself more than content. Postmodern fiction also often involves the elevation of marginalized voices.

Brazilian writer Joao Guimaraes Rosa was a formalist, postmodern writer in the sense that he introduced "magic realism" to Brazilian writing, and he expanded on the unique language of eastern Brazil to fuse his own new language in a move similar to *la negritude* of the Caribbean. Rosa profoundly affected the future of Brazilian writing by demonstrating that literature did not have to have a socially reforming agenda. According to Antonio Candido, Clarice Lispector likewise influenced Brazilian literature, due to her "impressive attempt to elevate Brazilian Portuguese to a plane hitherto unexplored, by adapting it to mental processes imbued with mystery□whereby fiction was no longer a mere exercise or sentimental adventure but rather a genuine instrument of the spirit, capable of helping us penetrate the most recondite labyrinths of the mind." Lispector straddled the modernist and postmodern movements. She was a modernist writer who also participated in the postmodernist concern for expressing states of consciousness and she experimented with narrative extensively.

Literary Heritage

Lispector is considered one of the leading Latin American writers of the twentieth century. The literary heritage of her fiction can be understood in the historical context of Latin-American literature, and more specifically Brazilian literature. Before conquest and colonization by European forces, particularly Spain, the native Indian cultures of Latin America had a well-developed tradition of written and oral literature. After colonization Latin- American literature emerged from the narratives of the conquered native Indian peoples as well as the European conquerors themselves, and later from the struggles of native peoples against colonial domination, a "literature of oppression." Brazil produced the first Latin-American novel in 1844, with *A moreninha* ("The Little Brunette") by Joaquim Manuel de Macedo. Latin-American fiction in the latter half of the twentieth century developed a concern with experimental narrative and linguistic style as a means of expressing social concerns. Lispector herself served as a forerunner to the flowering of Latin-American fiction by women authors that developed in the 1960s.

Critical Overview

The short story "Family Ties" was first published in 1952 in a collection of Lispector's stories called *Alguns contos* (*Stories*), but it did not receive much notice. Eight years later, in 1960, Lispector republished the story in *Lacos de familia* (*Family Ties*), along with other pieces, some already published and some new, all about family relationships. This time, her collection was reviewed favorably. In *Luso-Brazilian Review,* Rita Herman called *Lacos de familia* "a personal interpretation of some of the most pressing psychological problems of man in the contemporary western world. Liberty, despair, solitude, the incapacity to communicate, are the main themes that unite the separate stories into a definite configuration of the author's pessimistic perception of life." However, since the book, like all of Lispector's original writings, was written in Portuguese, her audience was quite limited. A new translation into English by Giovanni Pontiero, *Family Ties* (1972), launched the collection into a wider literary market, where it was appraised highly. Bruce Cook of *Review* noted the work's "intense concentration," and Lispector's book was cited, along with Guimarares Rosa, as a landmark of Brazilian literature in *Contemporary Latin American Literature* (1973). In general, the seventies found many of Lispector's works being translated into English as well as French, German, Spanish, and Czechoslovakian. With her work in the hands of a worldwide audience eager for texts with a feminist slant, Lispector's writing gained positive attention.

Lispector's writing career as a whole had taken off with the publication of her first novel, *Close to the Savage Heart*, in 1944, when she was just twenty-four. That semi-autobiographical novel won the Graca Aranha Prize and showed how Brazilian literature, according to Earl Fitz, "could benefit from such staples of modern fiction as the interior monologue; temporal dislocation; rejection of external orientation; structural fragmentation; and an emphasis on the ebb and flow of psychological, rather than chronological, time." However, it would be another twenty-two years before the appearance of a book-length study of her, by Benedito Nunes (1966). He and other early critics noticed the metaphysical focus of Lispector's writing, especially the influence of Sartre and Camus. In 1979, with the publication of *Vivre l'orange*, feminist French critic Helene Cixous began a decade of promoting Lispector as a paradigm for "l'ecriture feminine." Cixous found in her writing a feminine kind of "effacement of the subject," which has to do with the power of tolerance and acceptance that she finds in Lispector's female characters. Cixous presented her poetic musings about Lispector in a series of lectures that introduced Lispector to a wide, international audience; the lectures have been transcribed in her book *Readings with Clarice Lispector* (1990). The first English biography of Lispector, by Earl Fitz, was published in 1985. At that time, issues of narrative structure joined issues of gender in criticism of Lispector's fiction. Raymond Williams classified her as a feminist writer whose female characters search for "self-realization and freedom," and whose "constant focus is *nordestinas*, women from the Northeast of Brazil who are characterized as faceless beings who are disenfranchised." Others have discussed her narrative strategies, such as Maria Nunes, who notes Lispector's creative use of the interior monologue: "Lispector's originality lies

precisely in the fact that her stylistic control and coherence are used to create influential chaos in the consciousness of her characters." On the other hand, irritation with her stream-of-consciousness style of writing has also been registered. Philip Swanson, in his 1995 book *The New Novel in Latin America,* asks, "Is Clarice's revolutionary new language little more than just vagueness after all?"

Upon the occasion of Lispector's death in 1977, Earl E. Fitz wrote in the *Luso-Brazilian Review*, "Given the vigor and innovativeness of what we see here, one must wonder about the wonderful stories we could have expected from Clarice Lispector had she not died so prematurely. With her untimely passing, one of Latin America's most original and powerful voices has been stilled." Lispector continues to gain credence for her stylistic innovations in narrative. Her writing is now being appreciated for its craft, as well as its dramatic and disturbing portrayal of the human condition.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Hamilton is an English teacher at Cary Academy, an innovative private school in Cary, North Carolina. In this essay she analyzes the dramatic unity in the vague elements of Lispector's "Family Ties" that cohere into a formal tragedy.

The tight form of the tragedy, in which a character moves relentlessly towards catastrophe, seems to lie in direct opposition to the amorphous flow of a phenomenological or existential work such as "Family Ties." However, because Lispector's fluid narrative concerns the epiphanies of life, what the character does in response to his or her epiphanies constitutes a decision that is not unlike those made by the more traditional tragic hero, who, because of some inherent tragic flaw, can make no other decision than to fulfill his or her tragic destiny. In a conventional tragedy, the catastrophe results in death or madness, but in Lispector's hands, the tragedy is the perpetuation of existential nausea, from which the character fails to break free.

"Family Ties" portrays fluidly changing states of consciousness. The story has been called existential for its portrayal of anguish in an absurd and uncaring world, metaphysical for its philosophical feel, and phenomenological for its style of rendering states of consciousness. Giovanni Pontiero, who translated "Lacos de familia" ("Family Ties") into English, notes in an essay titled "The Drama of Existence in 'Lacos de Familia,'" that Lispector has forged "a highly unusual style among contemporary writers in Brazil. It is a style that is particularly effective when she creates the image and atmosphere of the world bordering on the realm of phenomenology. Like her characters, the reader is invited to examine experience from inside. Thus her prose style comes close to achieving that 'fertility and fluency' of expression discussed by Virginia Woolf in *Writer's Diary* (1953). Like the English novelist, Clarice Lispector also appears to be learning her craft under the most fierce conditions, now overcome by the brutality and wildness of the world, now overcome by the poetry of life."

Lispector achieves a phenomenological mood through a fragmented style with sudden shifts in narrative point of view, from outside of the character's mind to inside it, and back. The character's actual thoughts are interposed with the author's narration from that character's perspective. For example,

> Preoccupied, he watched his wife leading the child away and he feared that at this moment, they were both beyond his reach, she might transmit to their son. . .but what? "Catherine," he thought, "Catherine, this child is still innocent!" At what moment was it that a mother, clasping her child, gave him this prison of love that would descend forever upon the future man.

In the passage above, the first sentence is presented from the point of view of an omniscient narrator. Then in the next, Tony's thoughts are given in direct discourse. The

third sentence is in indirect interior monologue, where the author narrates Tony's ideas. Moving freely among these presentations results in the sensation of perceiving the story through Tony's consciousness, as he sees, and reacts to what he sees.

Phenomenology is about perception and seeing objects, and the phenomenological approach of "Family Ties" is further emphasized by a motif of seeing that pervades the story. One instance is Catherine watching her mother's hat fall over her eyes, then seeing her mother's watchful but unseeing face from the train window. Seeing occurs literally and in metaphor. The story is narrated almost entirely through the seeing eyes of its characters, first from Catherine's view of her mother, and then from her husband's watchful view of Catherine taking their son for a walk. Throughout the story, the characters' gaze takes in the action, which is then reported from their interior perception of it. There is little effort to portray the characters as characters, with personalities, but rather as interior minds perceiving the world. Pontiero notices that Lispector's "characters. . .cannot be described as 'types'" but rather "as images of different states of mind." Metaphorically, Tony "sees" that Catherine intends to create a bond with their son. In phenomenology, seeing and perceiving are the main mental processes, the physical seeing leading to metaphoric seeing as understanding.

The flow of consciousness is not totally amorphous, despite Lispector's assertion that her writing is mysterious because she lets it flow directly from her mind and does no editing. She claims to be "incapable of transposing feeling in any clear way without falsifying it□to falsify thought would be to rob writing of its only satisfaction. So I often find myself assuming an air of mystery□a phenomenon that I find extremely irksome in others." Whether or not she edited her writing, it succeeds in evoking shifts in consciousness quite realistically, yet her craft is most apparent in the way in which the amorphous flow of thought proceeds in a forward, plotted movement. Tragedy requires plot to unfold the causal sequence that ultimately leads to death or madness. Without a plot, catastrophic events may be sad, but not tragic. Tragedy requires a chain of events, with a fatal decision made by the protagonist. The plot line of "Family Ties" is tight, but it occurs internally, in the form of epiphany.

As Lispector's characters perceive and react to the world, they continually generate and modify a self that consists of consciousness. Through acts of perception, the characters confront the world and make decisions that mold their internal character, thus affecting what they observe, in a yin-and-yang relationship between person and perception. The characters experience an epiphany because of the interaction between observation and self-making, and these epiphanies form a very conventional tragic plot line. Catherine's epiphany takes place in two stages. First she reacts to her mother's adjusting the brim of a hat she had bought at her daughter's milliner's with a "somewhat tremulous" hand. Catherine realizes at this moment that her mother loves her, and that her mother is aging and frail. Her internal response is loving: "Catherine felt a sudden urge to ask her if she had been happy living with her father." However, Catherine fails to act on this impulse, and the train takes her mother away. The epiphany inherent in the event fails to change Catherine, however, because instead of acting consistently with her feelings, she hides behind formality and merely shouts, "Give my love to Auntie!" She walks away with relief, tinged with regret. Regret is a powerful emotion, as Lispector described

in a *cronica* entitled, "Learning to Live": "There are moments in all our lives which we regret having ignored, allowed to pass, or refused, and that regret is as painful as the deepest sorrow." Catherine's regretful epiphany leaves a residue that colors her reaction in the next stage of the story's climax, when Catherine' son calls her "ugly" because of the wheezing way in which she laughs, with pleasure, at his calling her "Mummy." Her second epiphany is apparent from her physical reaction, coloring, and in her instant decision to take the boy off for a walk. There is a causal relationship between her first and second epiphany, corresponding to rise and the climax of a tragedy. Massaud Moises finds evidence of "a dramatic unity" in the "internal action" in Lispector's stories. That climax is "the existential moment on which the characters stake their destinies." It is revealed "by a sudden profoundly psychological revelation which lasts a fleeting second, like the flashing light of a beacon in the dark, and thus escapes being captured in words." Catherine's tragic step of taking her son for a walk results from the residue of regret she felt after failing to respond intimately to her own mother. She creates a new bond with her son in the faint hope that she will succeed where her mother failed. That her mission is doomed from the start is spelled out by Tony, when he thinks that she will transmit a "prison of love that will descend forever upon the future man."

Epiphany leads to tragic results in this story because the characters fail to respond adequately to the moment, due to a tragic flaw. All of the characters in "Family Ties" have a tragic flaw that prevents them from growing and benefiting from their moments of epiphany. In fact, the characters seem almost to revel in their misery. Catherine associates "mother and daughter" with "life and repugnance," yet she walks away from the train station in a exuberant state. She has, she thinks, escaped the moment of truth through avoidance. But she does not realize that she has only taken another step into the human morass. Through her point of view, the narrator asserts that "nothing would prevent this little woman who walked swaying her hips from mounting one more mysterious step in her days." However, she takes her son down to the beach, away from the intimacy of home, to form her imprisoning bond with him. The phenomenological symbolism of her abrupt leave-taking suggests strength, but misplaced strength□a strength in failure. Likewise, the overbearing and criticizing but needy mother Severina shrinks back from being thrown physically against her daughter and tries to uphold an image of success and happiness to her fellow train passengers. She is not unusual in wanting to maintain appearances at the cost of risking a real bond with her daughter. Catherine decides to form the same unhealthy bond with her tiny son, giving him the same legacy that she resents in her relationship with own mother, yet she is happy in doing so. She enjoys the power and avoids thinking about the painful consequences. In a similar way, Tony decides to go to the movies after dinner to avoid being alone with the wife who is reattaching herself to their son instead of to him; he is avoiding confronting her with the comment he repeats impotently out of her hearing, that the child is "still innocent." Moises links these decisions to the existential philosophy that underlines Lispector's stories. Hers is an existential world, and "this world is inhabited by people who, not knowing the reason for life, commit endless gratuitous acts, fail to communicate among themselves, are impermeable to the 'other' and are condemned to an irremediable solitude." While existentialism certainly underlies the tragic

circumstances in this story, it follows the very traditional form of tragedy, within its phenomenological framework.

The tragic recognition that Lispector exposes in "Family Ties" is that love has hate in it. An analysis of the title of the story underscores this reading. Giovanni Pontiero points out "the double significance of the word *Lacos* (ties)□referring on the one hand to the chain of conformity with social conventions that link each human to his fellow men [sic]; on the other hand to the bonds of solitude and alienation inherent in our humanity." Despite its seeming amorphous flow, "Family Ties" is not just a tragic tale told in the phenomenological form. The phenomenological approach supplies the axis of the conflict, the climax, since the heart of the tragedy occurs not outside of the characters in a contest with a formidable enemy, the forces of nature, or fate, but internally, within their hearts. Their tragic flaws prevent them from learning and growing from their epiphanies. The real enemy lies within the character as a fatal inability to embrace intimacy. Each family member is bound by tragic family ties and is doomed to re-recreate these bonds of love and hate in an endless cycle like those of the Greek tragedies.

Source: Carole Hamilton, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #2

Brent has a Ph.D. in American culture with a specialization in film studies from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses family relationships in Lispector's story "Family Ties."

As its title implies, Lispector's short story "Family Ties" is concerned with relationships among family members. The story dwells upon the relationships between the characters in seven different juxtapositions, including: mother/daughter, daughter/ father, mother-in-law/son-in-law, grandmother/ grandson, mother/son, father/son, and husband/wife. Each relationship is characterized by coldness, distance, and alienation.

As the story opens, Catherine is riding in a taxi with her mother, Severina, to the train station after a two-week visit. Catherine's attitude toward her mother is described by the look in her eyes, which bears "a constant gleam of derision and indifference." Her mother expresses constant anxiety through her continual counting and recounting of her two suitcases. The mother also repeatedly asks Catherine if she has "forgotten anything." Her anxiety over having forgotten something symbolizes an absence in the relationship between mother and daughter; they have both "forgotten something" important about their relationship. They seem to have forgotten the "family tie" of mother/child intimacy, however remote in the past, which continues to bind them. They are only reminded of this long-forgotten intimacy when the taxi driver suddenly slams on the brakes, and the two women fall against each other: "Catherine had been thrown against Severina with a physical intimacy long since forgotten, and going back to the days when she belonged to her mother and father." However, this accidental moment of physical intimacy between mother and daughter is not characteristic of their relationship, even when Catherine was a child, as "they had never really embraced or kissed each other." While this could have been an opportunity for an acknowledgment of what they had "forgotten," both women respond with anxiety and further distance: "after the collision in the taxi and their composure had been restored, they had nothing further to say to each other□both of them feeling anxious to arrive at the station." While waiting for the train, mother and daughter still do not know what to say to each other. From Catherine's perspective, their mother/daughter relationship is one of distance and disdain: "As if 'mother and daughter' meant 'life and repugnance.'" In fact, "she could not say that she loved her mother." However, as the train is pulling out of the station, and mother and daughter exchange a final glance, Catherine does feel a sense that something has been "forgotten." And what they have "forgotten" is to acknowledge the "family ties" which bind them to one another as mother and daughter, despite their differences and the emotional distance they feel: "What had they forgotten to say to each other? It seemed to her that the older woman should have said one day, 'I am your mother, Catherine,' and that she should have replied, 'And I am your daughter.'" But it seems that it is literally too late for this acknowledgment, as the train pulls out of the station, and her mother's face disappears from view. The implication is that the inherent intimacy of this mother/daughter relationship will once again be "forgotten," and the relationship between the two women, despite their "family ties," will always be one of

distance, disdain, and alienation. However, the strong maternal image left with Catherine is indicated when, as the train pulls away, she sees that "her mother's face disappeared for a second and now reappeared, hatless, the topknot on her head undone and falling in white strands over her shoulders like the tresses of a madonna." This image refers to the Christian iconography of the mother of Jesus, often depicted in artistic representation as "madonna and child."

Although her relationship with her mother has always been one of distance, Catherine had a closer connection to her father. This intimacy between father and daughter, however, seems to have been built upon their mutual and clandestine sense of alienation from Catherine's mother: "When her mother used to fill their plates, forcing them to eat far too much, the two of them used to wink at each other in complicity without her mother ever noticing." Thus, Catherine's only experience of intimacy in her family of origin is one in which two family members secretly take sides in bonding over their distance from a third family member. Along with her sense of distance from her mother, Catherine's ideas about intimacy with her father are also indirectly based on alienation.

While Catherine's relationship with her mother is characterized by a mutual "forgetting" of the mother/daughter bond, as expressed through their coolness toward one another, her husband's relationship with her mother is even chillier: "During the older woman's two-week visit, the two of them had barely endured each other's company; the goodmornings and good-evenings had resounded constantly with a cautious tact which had made [Catherine] smile." Catherine seems to take a certain delight in observing the alienation between her husband and mother, as if it confirmed her own alienation from her mother. At the moment of departure, however, her mother attempts to reconcile with her son-in-law, as "before getting into the taxi, the mother had changed into the exemplary mother-in-law and the husband had become the good son-in-law." Catherine seems to enjoy observing her husband's discomfort at being "forced into being the son of that gray-haired little woman." Catherine's inability to think of her mother as a mother is indicated by the fact that she describes her as "that gray-haired little woman." Furthermore, Catherine's coolness toward her own husband is suggested by the fact that she seems to enjoy seeing him squirm; she even has to repress the urge to laugh at him.

Even the relationship between Severina and her grandson, Catherine and Tony's son, seems to be unpleasant. While the relationship between a grandmother and her grandchild is traditionally one of warmth and affection, this one is characterized by distance and antagonism. Severina complains to Catherine that her son is "thin and highly strung." The little expressions of endearment traditionally bestowed by a grandparent upon a beloved grandchild in this family have become perverted into a negative experience on the part of the grandchild. "During his grandmother's visit he had become even more distant and he had started to sleep badly, disturbed by the excessive endearments and affectionate pinching of the older woman."

Like her relationship with her mother, Catherine's relationship with her own son is characterized by distance and alienation. The son seems to have inherited Catherine's

sensibilities in his coolness, distance, and inability to express childish affection for his own mother. Like Catherine, her son lacks the ability to form any emotional attachment or connection, or express any human warmth, to other people. Catherine notes that "he observed things coldly, unable to connect them among themselves." In playing with an inanimate object, he is "exact and distant." Even when she tries to scold him, "the child looked indifferently into the air, communicating with himself." She finds that "his mind was always somewhere else. No one had yet succeeded in really catching his attention." Even when he addresses her as "Mummy," it is because he wants something. However, after returning from seeing her mother off at the train station, Catherine hears him address her as "Mummy" for the first time in a warmer tone. She momentarily feels that this is a "verification" of her maternal connection to him. However, this is immediately undermined when he looks at her and says "ugly." Catherine's inability to feel a maternal connection or sense of warmth toward her own mother is thus reproduced in her son's distant, cold, and even cruel regard for her.

The relationship of Tony, Catherine's husband, to their son seems to be even more distant and indifferent than any of the other relationships in the story. It is mentioned that Tony "had never really given much attention to his son's sensibility."

The relationship between Catherine and her husband Tony is almost as cool and distant as that between Catherine and her mother. Tony has always designated Saturdays as "his own," meaning that he is exempt from paying attention to his wife and son. When Catherine returns from the train station, he "scarcely raised his eyes from his book." It is implied that his indifference toward her seems to extend beyond his Saturdays. However, when Catherine spontaneously leaves the apartment with their son to take a walk, Tony becomes keenly aware that he is now literally alone. From this point, the perspective of the story changes from that of Catherine's to that of Tony's, as he watches his wife and son from the window. Tony reflects that, although the couple live "tranquilly" and "peacefully" and "everything worked smoothly" in their home, there is something lacking in their relationship. Catherine's coldness and distance from him is indicated by his description of her as "that serene woman of thirtytwo who never really spoke, as if she had lived since the beginning of time." He knows that, although he is a successful engineer with a promising future, Catherine "despises" their home life, and will grow to "hate" their life together.

All of the family relationships described in this story are characterized by coldness, distance, and alienation. A recurring image which captures the atmosphere of these "family ties" is one of imprisonment. While observing her child, Catherine imagines that she is "escaping from Severina," her mother. Tony imagines that mothers bestow upon their children a "prison of love," and that their son will grow up to feel "imprisoned" in their home. He imagines that, in leaving the house to take a walk with their son, Catherine is "escaping" from him and their marriage and home life. This story thus presents an extremely cynical and bitter depiction of the "ties" which constitute three generations of a family.

Source: Liz Brent, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Critical Essay #3

Korb has a master's degree in English literature and creative writing and has written for a wide variety of educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the isolation among the family members in "Family Ties."

With the short story collection *Family Ties*, Brazilian author Clarice Lispector firmly established her reputation. Though she has also written novels, in examining her life's work most critics agree that her true medium lies in the shorter fiction form. The stories in *Family Ties* explore those issues most crucial to the author. Writes Giovanni Pontiero in his introduction to the English translation of *Family Ties*, "[T]he stories of *Laços de Familia* give a comprehensive picture of the author's private world of deep psychological complexities. The narrative in these stories often appears to evolve from smoke from some momentary experience or minor episode that seems quite insignificant in itself. Action, as such, is virtually nonexistent, and the threads of tension are maintained by use of stream-of-consciousness techniques and interior monologues." Indeed, the plot of the story that lends its name to the collection could hardly be given such a weighty label, and the narration essentially takes place within the minds of two main characters, a husband and wife, who are estranged from each other as well as from the people who inhabit their world.

"Family Ties" can be divided into two sections. The first section features a thirty-two-yearold woman, Catherine, who is accompanying her mother to the train station at the end of a two-week visit. The women have very little proper communication, but an opportunity arises for them to make a connection, which both refuse. The second section takes place at Catherine's home. She decides to forge a bond with her son, and she takes him away, leaving her husband to wonder where they are going, what they are doing, and when they will return.

At the heart of the story is humankind's essential loneliness and alienation. As such, Lispector demonstrates the influence of existentialist writers, who were concerned with issues of freedom, human suffering and failure, and alienation. On a more personal level, however, Catherine, and to a lesser extent, her husband, show the effects of living a life apart. Their actions have ramifications for their son as well, but the reader is left not knowing whether Catherine's experience and her reaction will have any significant change on the relationship between mother and son, and possibly father and son.

The first section of the story makes clear the isolation in which the members of the family Catherine, her husband Tony, their four-year-old son, and her mother Severina exist. Nobody in this family makes any pretenses to true closeness or even derives pleasure in each other's company, not even husband and wife, or child and parent. Severina and Tony "had barely endured each other's company" throughout the visit. Severina, who thinks her grandson is too "thin and highly strung," scares him. "During his grandmother's visit he had become even more distant and he had started to sleep badly, disturbed by the excessive endearments and affectionate pinching of the old woman." Signifi- cantly, it is the very act of receiving attention that frightens the child

and disrupts his sense of self. Clearly, the child is not accustomed to being the focus of love, or more likely, accustomed to being the focus of any sort of emotion.

The section also shows that Catherine and Severina have never had any kind of close relationship themselves. Both women shy away from drawing together, as physically demonstrated in the taxi "when a sudden slamming of brakes threw them against each other." This unexpected occurrence shocks Catherine "because something had, in fact, happened. . .Catherine had been thrown against Severina with a physical intimacy long since forgotten." The contact reminds Catherine that she once "belonged to a father and a mother," though she immediately reveals that it was with her father that she had always had the "much closer relationship." For her part, after being thrown against her daughter, Severina reacts by paying attention to her luggage. "I haven't forgotten anything?" she asks her daughter, who gives her the gloves picked up from the floor of the cab. What both women have forgotten, however, is how to be a family, indeed, how to express emotion for each other or even how to *feel* emotion for each other. As Catherine admits, the words "mother and daughter" to her mean "life and repugnance." In fact, "she could not say that she loved her mother. Her mother distressed her, that was it."

At the moment of leave-taking, however, Catherine feels some strange stirring. She notices that her mother had "aged and that her eyes were shining," as if with unshed tears. When the bell announcing the departure of the train rings, the women "exchanged frightened glances." Suddenly, both of them feel their disconnection from each other, and ironically, this alienation is explicitly demonstrated to the reader by their similar thoughts. At the same moment that Catherine is about to ask her mother if she had forgotten anything, Severina again poses that question, "I haven't forgotten anything?" as she had in the cab. The women "looked apprehensively at each other□because, if something had really been forgotten, it was too late now." Catherine anxiously wants to open some line of communication. She wants to establish that a relationship actually exists between them. Her mother "should have said one day, 'I am your mother, Catherine,' and. . .she should have replied, 'And I am your daughter.'" With these words, Catherine and Severina would prove not merely their familial bond but a bond between two humans that exists because they want it to be so. All Catherine is able to say, however, is a warning not to sit in a draft.

As soon as the train pulls out of the station, however, Catherine returns to her usual persona. Moving from the platform, "she had recovered her brisk manner of walking," for "alone it was much easier." Ironically, as she walks, she moves in "perfect harmony" and demonstrates to any interested passerby "the relationship this woman had for the things of the world." Although she never openly manifested having a similar interest for her mother, her body retains the memory of what just transpired.

The second section of the story takes place at Catherine's home, and the action rises directly from Catherine's leave-taking with her mother. Catherine feels both the lack of connection with her mother and relief at "escaping" from her. These contradictory feelings affect how she treats her son, whom she is intent on reaching, both physically, in his room, and emotionally. The first glimpse of the child shows his isolation from his

parents—that he has been forced to live in a fairly solitary world— for he amuses himself by "playing with a wet towel, exact and distant." When Catherine speaks to him, he "looked indifferently into the air, communicating with himself." (And later, Tony's narration shows the son's inherent difference from his parents: "he stamped his feet and shouted in his sleep.") In the interaction between mother and son, the boy shows his disinterest—even his distaste— for his mother. He calls her "ugly" when she wheezes while laughing (an action that symbolically shows her transformation and her desire to be more open, for earlier the narration revealed that "she never in fact laughed when she felt the urge"). She grabs the child *"by the hand"* [italics mine] and leads him from the apartment where so little affection has been sown.

At this point, the story shifts to the mind of the husband, Tony. He, the man who had seemed disinterested in his wife's return (he "scarcely raised his eyes from his book" when she came in) and in his son's activities, suddenly feels the emptiness of the apartment. He reveals that while he liked Saturdays to be "his own," he also desired that Catherine and the boy be at home "while he pursued his private occupations." His narrative shows Tony's dual desires. He wants to be perceived as an adequate provider for a family but he is essentially a solitary man who wants both to be alone and to control his surroundings. While he values the relationship between himself and his wife, which he calls "tranquil," others might very well call it distant or even perverse, for his most in-depth revelation about his treatment of his wife is his confession that "he tried to humiliate her by entering the room while she was changing her clothes, because he knew that she had detested being seen in the nude. (Why did he find it necessary to humiliate her?)" The answer is clear— he seeks to maintain some, any, connection with his wife—though he does not even recognize it as such.

What provokes Tony's unhappiness at his wife's departure is his innate understanding that his wife is about to attain some sort of connection with their son: "Now mother and son were understanding each other within the mystery they shared." Though Tony has no true desire to share in any "mystery," either with his wife or his son, he does not want them to join without him. He would prefer that all members of the family continue to exist in their isolated boxes. In the end, Tony cannot handle his own explorations of his feelings. Instead of investigating why he is reacting so strongly, he, a man who treasures a life in which "everything worked smoothly," jettisons his thoughts into the future, when his wife will return with their son and all will return to normal. "When Catherine returned they would dine. . .'After dinner we'll go to the cinema,' the man decided. Because after the cinema it would be night at last, and this day would break up like the waves on the rocks of Arpoador."

Source: Rena Korb, in an essay for *Literature of Developing Nations for Students*, Gale, 2000.

Topics for Further Study

Why does Catherine have the urge to laugh at her husband's discomfiture when her mother apologizes to him for "anything [she] might have said in haste"? Why does she suppress her laughter?

What is "normal" about the relationship between Catherine and her mother? What is "abnormal" about it?

What is "normal" about the couple's marriage? What is "abnormal" about it?

What is the significance of the phrase "no one would know on what black roots man's freedom was nourished"?

Why does Tony not run after Catherine to prevent her from giving their son a "prison of love"?

In what ways is "Family Ties" representative of existential literature?

Compare and Contrast

1960: In Brazil, President Juscelino Kubitschek encouraged nationalism through public works projects sponsored by the government, but his spending on these improvements resulted in a higher national debt and inflation, such that the cost of living tripled in Brazil during his presidency. He was also accused of graft and corruption, a not-uncommon problem in Brazil and other Latin American nations. The weakness of his successor, Jânio Quadros, nearly led the country into civil war.

Today: After a period (from 1964 until 1985) of military rule rife with corruption and police terrorism, increased demands for democratization resulted in local elections (1982 for states and 1989 for president), but the two succeeding presidents were impeached for alleged corruption. President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, an academic rather than a military leader, came to power in 1994 on a campaign platform of democratic reform. His measures have resulted in progress in human rights (against Brazil's police force), economic reform, and education.

1960: The cost of living tripled in Brazil during a period of high inflation under President Kubitschek. Over two-thirds of the population subsisted on agriculture in rural areas. A small percentage of wealthy people controlled the government and the arts.

Today: Radical economic reforms instituted by President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, including a radical devaluing of the *real* (the currency of Brazil) in 1999, have succeeded in holding back inflation where other South American countries have gone into deeper and deeper recession. Currently Brazil's economic strength outweighs all of its South American neighbor nations together. At the same time, currently 75 percent of Brazil's population now resides in cities. A handful of wealthy influential people still govern the masses, however, who continue to suffer from high rates of illiteracy and poverty.

1960: Modernist literature either sought social change or expressed a sense of pessimism and exhaustion through flat characters who move relentlessly through a complex and absurd world.

Today: Postmodern literature attempts to express the uniqueness of the individual through the theme of relative values. At the same time themes' transcendence are on the increase, as writers reassert the presence of shared values and experiences.

What Do I Read Next?

Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea* (originally published in 1935 and issued in English translation in 1965), an existentialist novel about a man who reacts physically to the absurdity of life, inspired Lispector's work.

Lispector also admired Virginia Woolf. An excellent example of Woolf's work is *To the Lighthouse* (1927), a psychologically oriented portrayal of a young painter who struggles to express her fluid perceptions of life, which contrast markedly with the compass-ordered observations made by men.

Lispector related to Katherine Mansfield's novel *Bliss* (1920), about which she remarked, "This book is me."

Chilean writer Maria Luisa Bombal's *House of Mist* (1935) did for Chile what Lispector's works did for Brazil□shifted focus away from politics and into the feminine mind.

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A transcription and translation of French feminist Cixous' lectures about Lispector's fiction.

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The first full-length biography of Lispector in English.

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Lindstrom examines the narrative techniques used in *Family Ties* to demonstrate the confines of the expected female social roles and women's reactions to those roles.

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An interview that focuses on Lispector's writing habits and her interest in social issues.

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An assessment of Lispector's place in modern Brazilian literature.

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Nunes applies the various and somewhat contradictory terms for interior narration to Lispector's *Family Ties* .

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Literature of Developing Nations for Students (LDNfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, LDNfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and

undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of LDNfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of LDNfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in LDNfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by LDNfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

LDNfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Literature of Developing Nations for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the LDNfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Literature of Developing Nations for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Literature of Developing Nations for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from LDNfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from LDNfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Literature of Developing Nations for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Literature of Developing Nations for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of LDNfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Literature of Developing Nations for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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