

Realism and Fantastic in the Short Story “Sem olhos” [No Eyes], by Machado de Assis: A Chronotopical Investigation / *O realismo e o fantástico no conto “Sem olhos”, de Machado de Assis: uma investigação cronotópica*

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we analyze the short story “Sem olhos” [No Eyes], by Machado de Assis, while exploring the relationship between realism and fantastic in view of Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope. Throughout our study, we emphasize how that short story questions the perception of reality while simultaneously reflecting on social issues and keeping the ambiguity and uncertainty that often characterize the fantastic. We also identify a metadiegesis that brings complexity to multiple narrative levels and highlights autonomous spatiotemporal configurations, such as the chronotopes of the nocturnal reunion and of the unfamiliar lodging, both being recurrent in fantastic and gothic literature. Furthermore, our research argues that Machado de Assis subverts the traditional dichotomy between realism and fantastic through discursive strategies that integrate the supernatural elements to the realistic elaboration of the narrative itself. Lastly, we highlight how the parallelisms between the metadiegetic levels forge an aesthetic of uncertainty while delving into subjacent psychological and social themes.

KEYWORDS: Short story; Realism; Fantastic; Chronotope; Machado de Assis

RESUMO

O presente artigo analisa o conto “Sem olhos”, de Machado de Assis, e explora as relações entre o realismo e o fantástico com base no conceito de cronotopo, proposto por Mikhail Bakhtin. Nesse sentido, destacamos como o conto questiona a percepção da realidade, ao passo que reflete sobre questões sociais, mantendo a ambiguidade e a incerteza características do fantástico. O nosso estudo identifica no conto uma metadiegesis que complexifica os níveis narrativos e evidencia configurações espaço-temporais autônomas, como o cronotopo da reunião noturna e da hospedagem infamiliar, ambos recorrentes na literatura fantástica e gótica. Além disso, nossa pesquisa sustenta que Machado de Assis subverte a dicotomia entre realismo e fantástico, utilizando estratégias discursivas que integram o sobrenatural à construção realista da narrativa. Por fim, destacamos como os paralelismos entre os níveis metadieéticos moldam uma estética da incerteza, ao passo que questões sociais e psicológicas subjacentes são exploradas.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Conto; Realismo; Fantástico; Cronotopo; Machado de Assis

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The concept of *chronotope*, as proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981),¹ refers to the essential relationship between time and space and to the various forms in which both were artistically assimilated by the literary discourse. In other words, it is a concept that, besides emphasizing how inseparable and interlaced time and space are in the fictional narrative, postulates that these create a meaningful context to the characters' actions and events. For this reason, the chronotope is not just associated with the physical description of the environment in which the plot happens, but also to the ways that this environment may influence and be influenced by the characters' temporal experiences. Bakhtin borrows the term as a metaphor from mathematical sciences and from Albert Einstein's Theory of Relativity, transporting to the aesthetic analysis the intrinsic connectedness of time and space by understanding "time as the fourth dimension of space" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84).² It is in the literary artistic chronotope, as a category of both content and form, that "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 84),³ since space becomes charged and integrated to the flow of time, while time solidifies and manifests itself artistically, becoming visible.

As we analyze the chronotope in literary works, be they contemporary or from past eras, we may understand how humanity and society were/are represented, since the chronotope can be said to be a link between the world in which we live and the worlds that we represent. For this reason, "the concept of time brings with it a concept of man; thus, to each new temporality corresponds a new man. We start from time to identify the point in which it is articulated with space and fused with it into a unity" (Amorim, 2006, p. 103; translation)⁴ – it is, after all, the distribution, in spatial and temporal perspective, of *human actions*. Beyond the description of space or time by themselves, Bakhtin identifies in them the human element itself of the plot. As such, the chronotope can change the form through which man is represented in narrative, be it man as belonging to the

¹ BAKHTIN, Mikhail Mikhailovich. Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel. In: BAKHTIN, Mikhail Mikhailovich. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* by M. M. Bakhtin. Edited by Michael Holquist; translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981. pp. 84-258.

² See footnote 1.

³ See footnote 1.

⁴ In the original: "a concepção de tempo traz consigo uma concepção de homem e, assim, a cada nova temporalidade, corresponde um novo homem. Parte, portanto, do tempo para identificar o ponto em que este se articula com o espaço e forma com ele uma unidade."

public/collective sphere, be it belonging to the private/individual sphere: the notions of time and space may be perceived by each character in a different way, as the chronotope of a literary text is also intrinsic to the ethical conceptions of man and world that are stylized in the form of the consciousness of each character. This makes so that, in a narrative, the chronotope may appear as a macro form and/or may be divided in smaller chronotopes as a fragmentation of the major one. We may take as an example the characters of the rogue, clown and fool in the novel, which “create around themselves their own special little world, their own chronotope” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 159)⁵ because they are bonded to the theatricality of the public square and its figurative and reflective attributes. While a traditional character moves around the world and has it as his or her horizon, those figures can relate to the world from an external position, seeing reality as falsehood (and even mimicking an image of the author-creator in face of life) – so, even when it looks like they live in the same world as the other characters, from a literary standpoint they are in their own chronotope, one in which life acquires a theatrical and farcical aspect.

One of the most important types of chronotope described by Bakhtin is the *chronotope of the castle*, which appeared and consolidated itself in the English gothic novels of the late eighteenth century. The literary work that introduced this chronotope was *The Castle of Otranto*, by Horace Walpole (2014), published in 1764. According to Bakhtin (1981, pp. 245-246),⁶ unlike the marvelous castle of the chivalric romance or of the fairytale, Walpole’s “castle is saturated through and through with a time that is historical in the narrow sense of the world, that is, the time of the historical past.” This means that the castle brings in itself marks engraved by the centuries and generations in diverse parts of its own structure, from the furniture to the family portraits hanging on the walls. The castle dates back to centuries ago and is oriented towards the past, challenging the current era and its new values. In a sense, the castle is a symbol of antiquity and grandeur, but also represents isolation and obscurity. That is how this chronotope establishes itself in gothic literature and, despite being found initially by Bakhtin in *The Castle of Otranto*, it was greatly expanded and outlined by the end of the eighteenth century and through the nineteenth. We could mention works such as the novels *Carmilla*,

⁵ See footnote 1.

⁶ See footnote 1.

by Sheridan Le Fanu (2012),⁷ published in 1872, and *Dracula*, written by Bram Stoker (2006) in 1897,⁸ both of which bring this chronotope already established. This chronotope is then associated to the gothic novel due to it being almost a main archetypical element in many works of the genre.

Nevertheless, the representation of the castle in gothic literature did not take long to be associated with a haunted atmosphere, full of dark corridors, secret rooms and mysterious passages, elements that gave this chronotope an air of suspense and terror through the years. Furthermore, the castle may be the lair of enigmatic figures, such as decadent nobles, sinister villains and even ghosts or hauntings that contribute to its somber and mysterious atmosphere. Adding to all of this, there are still other resources like family curses, evil pacts and unexplainable events that created a supernatural aura around this fictional space so charged with time.

Borges (1999, pp. 272-276)⁹ discusses how the invention of those spaces in gothic literature, especially the castle environment, brought such deep consequences that the English language developed a new vocabulary associated with them. In this perspective,

Toward the beginning of the nineteenth century, or the end of the eighteenth, certain adjectives of Saxon or Scottish origin (*eerie, uncanny, weird*) came into circulation in the English language, serving to define those places or things that vaguely inspire horror (Borges, 1999, p. 272; emphasis by the author).¹⁰

This linguistic consequence, according to Borges, appears at the moment in which this concept of space becomes common enough to demand from language itself words capable of describing a new sentiment of horror. They refer to a horror based on a feeling of unfamiliarity and strangeness that shapes itself as a new relationship with space, which is why “Such adjectives correspond to a romantic concept of landscape” (Borges, 1999, p. 272).¹¹

⁷ LE FANU, Sheridan. *Carmilla*. London: Duke Classics, 2012 [1872]. We point out that the setting in *Carmilla* is not properly a castle, but a *Schloss*. This German word, usually translated as castle, is used as a reference to a specific type of Austrian building, smaller but similar to a castle or *château*. Anyway, in *Carmilla*, from a narrative standpoint, the *Schloss* works as a castle of minor proportions.

⁸ STOKER, Bram. *Dracula*. Irvine: Saddleback Educational Publishing, 2006 [1897].

⁹ BORGES, Jorge Luis. The Noble Castle of the Fourth Canto. In: BORGES, Jorge Luis. *Selected Non-Fictions*. Edited by Eliot Weinberger; translated by Esther Allen, Suzanne Jill Levine, and Eliot Weinberger. New York: Viking Penguin, 1999. pp. 272-276.

¹⁰ See footnote 9.

¹¹ See footnote 9.

This way, literature begins to conceive a kind of spatial horror and, because of it, creates a new language to express this horror, since the previous lexical structures did not have the resources to describe the type of sensation built by those literary physical spaces. Since then, the supernatural element, especially in the form of the *uncanny*, continued to perform a prominent role in Occidental literature, not limiting itself to the gothic genre, but reappearing in different forms and manners in various genres. After all, the uncanny keeps suggesting a fascination of humanity towards things beyond comprehension, being the center from which many architectonic forms are configured, including horror, dystopian fiction, marvelous real and fantastic in general.

Amaral (2023, p. 36) defines the uncanny as a concept that “involves the aesthetic categories that share the presence of extraordinary, supernatural elements. Among them are the fantastic, the marvelous, the marvelous realism, the strange and the grotesque.”¹² In his views, the uncanny is an archetypal aesthetic construct that incorporates those many categories that have the presence of elements usually called, in a general sense, supernatural, and which generally refer to something unusual and weird (once considered the cultural and scientific reality of the present time as a parameter). In a literary context, the uncanny is frequently associated with elements that do not fit or even defy the laws of logic and reality.

In the course of the romantic and realist literatures, other chronotopes were developed and strongly influenced the evolution of those present in fantastic literature and connected to the uncanny. It is the case of the *chronotope of the unfamiliar lodging* and the *chronotope of parlors and salons*. The first one was not proposed by Bakhtin, but is seen in a long tradition of uncanny stories. Generally, the unfamiliar lodging is related to a new place for the character (and as such, an unknown place), of a brief stay, and thus reflects a feeling of temporary displacement; it also possesses an obscure and sinister history associated to the space, in which mysterious events happen and the characters are haunted in dreams or while investigating its phenomena. “The Dreams in the Witch-House,” a short story by H. P. Lovecraft (2013) written in 1932, brings this chronotope with its plot. Walter Gilman, a Mathematics undergraduate, rents a room at the old Witch-House, known for its connections with occultist practices. The house is described as a

¹² In the original: “[...] engloba as categorias estéticas que têm em comum a presença de elementos extraordinários, sobrenaturais. Entre elas estão o fantástico, o maravilhoso, o realismo maravilhoso, o estranho e o grotesco.”

decadent and ancient structure, with a sinister history dating back to the city of Arkham's days of witchcraft. Because of this, the locals believe that the house is haunted by its previous owner, Keziah Mason, a witch practitioner of obscure rituals. After settling into the house, Gilman begins to experiment a series of disturbing dreams and vivid hallucinations. He hears strange sounds, see grotesque images and feels an evil presence around, making so he cannot distinguish between real and unreal.

The second chronotope, of parlors and salons, fulfilled its significance in authors such as Stendhal and Balzac, but also acquired somber contours in other narrative contexts. From the point of view of plot and composition, we can observe that it is in parlors and salons, at the present time of the bourgeois society, that happen the meetings, the unfolding of intrigues and their own plots, the denouement of many situations; “this is where *dialogues* happen, something that acquires extraordinary importance in the novel, revealing the character, ‘ideas’ and ‘passions’ of the heroes” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 246).¹³ In parlors and salons we have both the construction and destruction of social and political reputations, as we have gathered in a single space the gradations of a social hierarchy. Those places “unfold forms that are concrete and visible, the supreme power of life's new king—money” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 247),¹⁴ so we have a fusion between the social-public and the individual-private.

In its spatial dimension, this implies a simultaneously physical and social aspect of the chronotope, to which we add a discursive one of the utmost importance and that should be emphasized. The physical space refers to the concrete environment in which interactions occur, such as a meeting room, a salon or even a more public space. However, this space does not exist in an isolated form, as it is continuously molded and reinterpreted by the social practices and discourses happening inside of it. In its temporal dimension, the reunion is the moment in which political and economic tensions come from the public and exterior space to an intimate and private place, and then economic conflicts become personal vendettas. This way, we may understand the social relationships between the characters from the discourses conveyed by each of them, since, as Bakhtin (1981)¹⁵ thought, this space-time is not just physical, but also social. It is for this reason that in dialogues between members of a superior economic and political class we should be able

¹³ See footnote 1.

¹⁴ See footnote 1.

¹⁵ See footnote 1.

to identify this social dimension of space-time in the interactions between individuals, in the use of certain linguistic expressions, in the matters discussed, in the exchange of ideas and in the negotiations that reflect, refract and reinforce the social position and power of the characters. The discourses do not present just a simple exchange of information, but an exercise of power and influence in which words are tools to consolidate or challenge hierarchies and social systems. That is the reason why Bakhtin (1981)¹⁶ claims that it is in this discursive space that reputations are built or destroyed.

However, it is also in this chronotope that we have the gathering around the fireplace in cold and rainy days, while those same characters may share dark and somber stories. An example of this is seen in the legend that involves the creation, in 1818, of Mary Shelley's (2018) *Frankenstein*,¹⁷ a story as intriguing as the novel itself. During a stormy night, while traveling through Europe, Shelley was hosted in Villa Diodati, close to Lake Geneva in Switzerland, along with a group of writers and other intellectuals that included her husband, poet Percy Busshe Shelley, and Lord Byron. Due to the bad weather, they were confined to the house and decided to spend time entertaining themselves by telling horror stories – curiously, one of them would eventually become the origin of one of the most iconic literary works ever made. Inspired by recent nightmares, by talks on the limits of science and by philosophical questions about the nature of life and creation, Mary Shelley imagined the story of Frankenstein, later expanded in the 1818 novel. Although it was born as a real situation, this event became a legend (giving an aesthetic form to that occasion, transforming the environment and the circumstances of the reunion in a chronotope) that strongly influenced the fictional tradition of the reunion of bourgeois intellectuals, in a parlor, sharing horror stories.

The movie *Dracula's Daughter* (1936), directed by Lambert Hillyer, famously fictionalized that same event. Mary Shelley, Byron and other writers are gathered in the same context and begin telling the story of count Dracula's daughter, so this situation becomes the initial chronotope in which the 1930s gothic horror movie builds its plot. This tradition was extended to literature, so it is not rare to find uncanny stories told from the perspective of friends reunited in a parlor, sharing dark narratives among them. This chronotope appears, frequently, in multiple fantastic short stories by Guy de Maupassant

¹⁶ See footnote 1.

¹⁷ SHELLEY, Mary. *Frankenstein: The 1818 Text*. London and New York: Penguin Classics, 2018 [1818].

(2004),¹⁸ such as “The Wolf,” “Magnetism,” “The Apparition and Fear,” published between 1882 and 1884. In all these examples, we have at the beginning a frame-narrative concerning a reunion of colleagues and/or friends, right after dinner (at night), in which one of them will tell a somber story that becomes the main plot. This clearly shows how that salons and parlors chronotope, identified by Bakhtin in Realist literature, may present new variations when developed along the sensibilities of the gothic literature. By being associated to the uncanny, it gains new contours and a form that could be called the *chronotope of the nocturnal reunion of the high society, in a parlor, sharing horror stories*.

Even with gothic literature being usually associated with Romanticism in a strict way, in truth we have a clear connection to literary realism in general. It is enough to observe that, once literary culture began an inclination mostly to an expression of artistic realism, based on empiricism and rationalist ideas, the uncanny appears as a natural antithesis to this movement, since

The gothic narrative strongly reverberates influences that Enlightenment left on Occidental thought: the gaps resulting from the rationalization that took place of the older theological worldviews, the ancestral dread that the Age of Enlightenment could not eradicate and the emergent fears generated by the progression of science and technology (Moraes; Menegotto, 2024, p. 437; our translation).¹⁹

Under this perspective, nature (as the exterior world) functions, in a way, as a representation of the interior world (emotion and intellect). Which means that the Enlightenment, in a philosophical sense, also extends itself to a concept of nature that, under the daylight, represents the enlightened ideals. However, this same nature, at the dark of night, becomes a representation of philosophical obscurity reflected on an equally obscure nature. For this reason, the chronotope of parlors and salons, in a gothic context, will prioritize reunions that happen at night, a symbolical moment in which philosophical thought cannot explain the world and its phenomena.

¹⁸ MAUPASSANT, Guy. *Complete Original Stories by Guy the Maupassant*. Urbana: Project Gutenberg, 2004. *E-book*. Available in: <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3090>. Accessed in: feb. 19th, 2025.

¹⁹ In the original: “A narrativa gótica reverbera fortemente as influências que o Iluminismo deixou no pensamento ocidental: as lacunas resultantes da racionalização que tomou o lugar das antigas concepções teológicas do mundo, os medos ancestrais que a Era das Luzes não conseguiu erradicar e os temores emergentes gerados pela progressão da ciência e da tecnologia.”

Furthermore, the chronotope of the nocturnal reunion indicates a brief, momentary temporality, since only during this time reality can be suspended and threatened. It is an instant, an impressive moment in which we exit reality, but not permanently. By the end of the story, once the reunion is over, usually there is a return to reality. Passos (2001, p. 69, our translation, emphasis by the author) identifies this same architectonic element inside the structure of the short story genre as a whole, in a way that reading it “implies, then, a brief suspension of the daily life, suspension rewarded by the *ex-abrupto* entrance in another form of vital and social organization.”²⁰ She points out this recurrent trace as already present in horror short stories of the nineteenth century, since

The determinant trait of time and space provides the necessity of immediately transforming a common episode into something that surpasses it, forcing us to work with a special kind of synthesis, with the tone and especially with the rupture of limits as a way to obtain – we emphasize – surprisingly meaningful aspects of the “human condition” or of the “social, historical and cultural order” (Passos, 2001, p. 71; our translation).²¹

As we understand, that is why it is especially in the short story that we recurrently find the chronotope of the nocturnal reunion. This chronotope is situated in a brief instant of rupture, during the temporally short episode of a reunion in which members of the social order are gathered, and it happens at night, as it symbolizes the opposition to enlightened ideals. Given this premise, gothic literature presents itself as a dialectical pair to realist literature. In gothic literature, the conception of reality finds itself threatened and empiricist and rationalist philosophies do not explain certain phenomena and events of the world. Based on this idea, we could explain why novels such as *The Castle of Otranto* (2014 [1764]), already mentioned, and *Dangerous Liaisons* (2007 [1782]), by Choderlos de Laclos,²² appeared in such a close period. We could also mention Émile

²⁰ In the original: “[...] implica, assim, a breve suspensão do cotidiano, suspensão gratificada com a entrada *ex-abrupto* em outra forma de organização vivencial e social.”

²¹ In the original: “O determinante do tempo e do espaço propicia a necessidade de transformar de imediato um episódio comum em algo que o ultrapasse, obrigando-nos a trabalhar com um tipo especial de síntese, com o tom e, em especial, com a ruptura de limites a fim de obter – reiteramos – aspectos surpreendentemente significativos da ‘condição humana’ ou da ‘ordem social, histórica e cultural’.”

²² CHODERLOS DE LACLOS, Pierre. *Dangerous Liasons*. Transl.: Helen Constantine. London and New York, Penguin Classics, 2007 [1782].

Zola's *Germinal* (2004 [1885])²³ being close to the publication of *Dracula* (2006 [1897]).²⁴

Both of these chronotopes that we have been discussing (the chronotope of the unfamiliar lodging and the chronotope of the nocturnal reunion), with time, established themselves as very strongly connected to gothic and fantastic literature, as they gained supernatural overtones typical and characteristic of the uncanny. Although fantastic literature was not addressed by Bakhtin, we can interpret his mention of the chronotope of the castle as a presage of the first great chronotope of fantastic literature – which, as we have seen, was not limited to it. The fantastic literature developed chronotopes typical of its narrative that appeared in significant works, such as those by Machado de Assis, and can be observed through the fantastic short story “*Sem olhos*” [No Eyes], published in 1876 in *Jornal das Famílias* [Families' Paper] (RJ).

At the beginning, we are presented to an intimate and domestic circle reunited at the Vasconcelos' residence. Besides that couple, we have other four guests, gathered in a parlor: the couple Bento Gonçalves and Maria do Céu, appellate judge Cruz and bachelor Antunes. At the first sentence of the story, the narrator tells that everyone was reunited at the “intimate parlor room” (Assis, 2014; our translation),²⁵ the place where tea was served while they discussed diverse subjects, especially themes related to souls, witches, ghosts, werewolves and other “ancient and modern popular beliefs” (Assis, 2014; our translation).²⁶ Despite being brief, this initial reference to the place in which the frame-narrative happens takes us to the chronotope of the nocturnal reunion, while giving us information on the degree of closeness between the characters and their social and ideological positions.

The definition itself of the uncanny subject as a *popular belief* also sets the distance between an empiricist conception of reality among the economically dominant classes and another magical, supernatural of the working classes. From the point of view of the characters in the short story, the Brazilian economic division is reproduced culturally as a division between real/supernatural and between realism/uncanny, which is the reason why Bento Soares disputes that believing in ghosts “would be supposing we

²³ ZOLA, Emile. *Germinal*. London and New York, 2004 [1885].

²⁴ See footnote 8.

²⁵ In the original: “[...] saleta das palestras íntimas [...]”

²⁶ In the original: “[...] crenças populares antigas e modernas.”

are simpletons” (Assis, 2014; our translation).²⁷ Otherwise, from the narrator standpoint, this dominant class view has a comically self-centered character, symbolized by how Bento Soares is entirely incapable of comprehending the existence of anyone who could believe in something he does not, due to a temporal perspective (“the humankind appeared on Earth at April 1st, 1832, the date he was born”)²⁸ and due to the way “This conviction diminished or eliminated certain psychological phenomena and reduced the history of the planet and its inhabitants to a baptismal certificate and various local happenings” (Assis, 2014; our translation).²⁹

From the moment that the subject of the conversation starts dealing with supernatural elements, Bento Soares shows his incredulity in face of those stories, since to him they are silly and childish inventions. The dialogue then forks into two different conversations: Mr. Vasconcelos, Bento Soares and the judge follow up on “some news relating to ancient and modern popular beliefs” (Assis, 2014; our translation),³⁰ while the bachelor Antunes, Mrs. Vasconcelos and Maria do Céu talk about clothing, especially about what Céu is dressing. This bifurcation is somewhat suggestive, since according to the Brazilian historical and social context of the nineteenth century, it would be expected that “the groups were formed between men and women; however, the bachelor prefers to be with the ladies and talk about *toilette*” (Gonçalves, 2016, p. 53; our translation, emphasis by the author),³¹ a subject hardly represented literarily, at the time, as part of a conversation that included men.

At this point, the third-person narrator describes Maria do Céu’s physiognomy, highlighting her among the other characters. He says:

Maria do Céu was a beautiful woman, even if short, or maybe because of it, inasmuch as her features were consonant to her stature; she had tiny, round eyes, *a small mouth that the bachelor compared to a rosebud*, and a nose that the biblical poet could only by hyperbole compare to the tower of Gilead. The hand, yes, this one was a lily of the valley – *lilium convallium* –, seemed pulled out of a statue, not of Venus,

²⁷ In the original: “[...] isto é querer supor que somos uns beócios.”

²⁸ In the original: “[...] a espécie humana aparecera na terra no primeiro dia de abril de 1832, data de seu nascimento.”

²⁹ In the original: “Esta convicção diminuía ou antes eliminava certos fenômenos psicológicos e reduzia a história do planeta e de seus habitantes a uma certidão de batismo e vários acontecimentos locais.”

³⁰ In the original: “[...] algumas notícias relativas a crenças populares antigas e modernas.”

³¹ In the original: “[...] os grupos se formassem entre homens e mulheres; no entanto, o bacharel prefere ficar com as senhoras e falar sobre *toilette*.”

but her son; and *I ask for forgiveness by this mixture of sacred and profane things, as I am obliged by Maria do Céu's own nature. Quiet, she could be put on an altar; but, if her eyes moved, she was little less than a demon. She had a peculiar way of using them that, a few years earlier, put a spell on Bento Gonçalves' gravitas, phenomenon that bachelor Antunes found the most natural in the world.* This night she was wearing a pearl colored dress, subject of the conversation between the bachelor and the two ladies. Antunes, without responding that the pearl color was perfect on Bento Soares' wife, opined that any other color would do the same, *from what it could be reasonably inferred that in his assessment the most beautiful portion of Maria was not the dress, but herself* (Assis, 2014; our translation and emphasis).³²

This description gives some interesting clues to inform us of an apparent amorous indiscretion between Maria do Céu and Antunes. One of them is the comparison, made by the bachelor, of her mouth to a rosebud: this suggests that Antunes, by fixing his attention in Maria do Céu, noticed the tenderness and smoothness of her lips; besides transmitting a romantic feeling, it implies some sensuality. By the end of the description, the narrator intensifies this perception that Antunes is intensely observing Bento Soares' wife by emphasizing that *it could be reasonably inferred* that the bachelor was not appreciating just the dress, but Maria do Céu, who was *the most beautiful portion*.

Besides, when the narrator characterizes her, he says that it is Maria do Céu's own nature that mixed sacred and profane things, and that she used these elements in a peculiar way that *put a spell on Bento Soares, a phenomenon that Antunes found the most natural in the world*. This assertion suggests that the bachelor was magically enchanted by Maria do Céu. Another interesting point in this contrast between sacred and profane appears when the narrator says that, when Maria do Céu moved her eyes, she became little less than a demon. This configuration of the eyes, together with the supernatural division between sacred and profane and the use of terms like *demon* and *spell* related to

³² In the original: "Maria do Céu era uma mulher bela, ainda que baixinha, ou talvez por isso mesmo, porquanto as feições eram consoantes à estatura; tinha uns olhos miúdos e redondos, *uma boquinha que o bacharel comparava a um botão de rosa*, e um nariz que o poeta bíblico só por hipérbole poderia comparar à torre de Galaad. A mão, que, essa, sim, era um lírio dos vales – *lilium convalium* –, parecia arrancada a alguma estátua, não de Vênus, mas de seu filho; e eu *peço perdão desta mistura de cousas sagradas com profanas, a que sou obrigado pela natureza mesma de Maria do Céu. Quieta, podiam pô-la num altar; mas, se movia os olhos, era pouco menos que um demônio. Tinha um jeito peculiar de usar deles que enfeitiçou alguns anos antes a gravidade de Bento Soares, fenômeno que o bacharel Antunes achava o mais natural do mundo*. Vestia nessa noite um vestido cor de pérola, objeto da conversa entre o bacharel e as duas senhoras. Antunes, sem contestar que a cor de pérola ia perfeitamente à esposa de Bento Soares, opinava que era geral acontecer o mesmo às demais cores; *donde se pode razoavelmente inferir que em seu parecer a porção mais bela de Maria não era o vestido, mas ela mesma*."

someone's *nature* or what is *natural* in the world, is extremely important to the composition of the short story and deserves to be highlighted, as it is going to be repeated a few more times throughout the narration.

After Maria do Céu's characterization, the group of ladies and bachelor Antunes turn their attention to the second group that talked slightly louder. The question that excited their mood was a small clash between the opinions of Bento Soares and judge Cruz: the first one piously doubted the existence of ghosts, while the second insisted that one could not deny their existence. Maria do Céu and bachelor Antunes get in the discussion giving support to Bento Soares, affirming that ghosts are produced by imagination and fear. Maria do Céu, disdainful and sententiously, says that "ghosts are born from fear [...]. Whoever does not have fear does not see ghosts"³³ (Assis, 2014, our translation) and, when questioned about what were her fears, responds: "I have no fear of anything or anyone" (Assis, 2014; our translation).³⁴

The bachelor, also disdainful of the judge's fears, comments: "If entering the imperial court results in visions of this nature, I declare that I am going to cut short my ambitions' wings – said the bachelor *looking at* Bento Soares' wife, *as if he was seeking her approval*" (Assis, 2014, our translation and emphasis).³⁵ Antunes' conjecture points to two relevant data. As we previously commented upon, this kind of nocturnal reunion brings to the private space the social dimension of the characters in a resignified manner. By focusing on Cruz's public profession and the fact that he is using a discourse, in the private sphere, that does not coincide with the expected sophistication of his social dimension, we have the spatial characterization of this chronotope as simultaneously physical, social and discursive. This is confirmed when, before that moment, Bento Soares says, with some arrogance, that fear of the supernatural is based just on popular beliefs, legends and fairytales that he would never believe and "there was not a man in the world capable of having believed in them even once" (Assis, 2014; our translation).³⁶ The chronotope, then, does not have a space-time just limited to the physical plane, as it is also ideological: the character of judge Cruz figures a social order very representative

³³ In the original: "[...] os fantasmas são frutos do medo [...]. Quem não tem medo não vê fantasmas."

³⁴ In the original: "[...] não tenho medo de nada nem de ninguém."

³⁵ In the original: "Se a entrada na Relação dá em resultado visões dessa natureza, declaro que vou cortar as asas às minhas ambições – observou o bacharel *olhando* para a esposa de Bento Soares, *como a pedir-lhe aprovação do dito*."

³⁶ In the original: "[...] que houvesse homem no mundo capaz de ter crido neles uma vez ao menos."

of the nineteenth century, the juridical order. However, this order will be broken or at least unbalanced by his narration of a supernatural experience he lived when young.

The second data is in the look given by Antunes to Maria do Céu. While his comment is directed to Cruz, his eyes are turned to Bento Soares' wife. As the strangeness of the act was not enough, the narrator explains that his look was asking for approval in relation to his comment. The subtleness of the furtive looks traded between the pair, added by the prudent smiles, excessively courteous and gracious gestures and intimate conversations on unusual subjects, according to Waki (2019, p. 33; our translation), form the basis to a supposition of a discreet love triangle in which "Maria do Céu and bachelor Antunes, even next to her husband and close to friends shared between them, show a clearly erotic interest for each other."³⁷

Faced by the mockery of his companions, Cruz says that, had his colleagues seen what he once saw, they would be frightened and fearful. As all the characters get curious at the comment, "the mystery itself and the judge's refusal made the appetite grow. The men insisted; the women joined the chorus" (Assis, 2014; our translation).³⁸ He gives in to the demands and decides to tell the story that justifies his belief in ghosts, which represents the passage from the frame-narrative to the second narrative level.

We must make a brief (but necessary) digression about the relation between the narratives and their narrators. According to Genette (1980),³⁹ the narrative levels are organized based on the relationship between different narratives inside a single story. In this sense, the narrative level refers to organized structures, built and interconnected organically. Genette observed that narrative instances may be unfolded, occurring in more than one narrative enunciation with narrators from distinct levels. For this reason, the French theorist distinguished some narrative levels: extradiegetic, intradiegetic and metadiegetic, with the last one being the object of our interest.

The metadiegetic level, also called by Bal (1977) hipodiegetic, is the one in which we find a narrative inside the narrative itself, as told by a character that belongs to the first level of the story. This way, as soon as Cruz begins telling his story as a report from

³⁷ In the original: "Maria do Céu e o Bacharel Antunes, mesmo próximos ao marido dela e em meio a amigos comuns, demonstram um claro interesse erótico um pelo outro."

³⁸ In the original: "[...] e o próprio mistério e recusa do desembargador faziam crescer o apetite. Os homens insistiram; as senhoras fizeram coro com eles."

³⁹ GENETTE, Gérard. *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*. Translated by Jane E. Lewin; foreword by Joanthan Culler. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980.

his memory, he creates a second narrative level. It is possible to highlight that, in this second level, as Genette (1980)⁴⁰ reminds us, we have spaces, actions and characters that are autonomous in relation to the first level. There is still the possibility of, inside this second level, another metadiegetic level being built by having another character narrating a new story, a phenomenon actually found in Machado de Assis' short story. This existence of many narrative levels created by metadiegetic narrations, besides creating a frame-narrative composition, also gives the reader the possibility of observing connections and parallelisms between all those different levels.

Genette (1980)⁴¹ outlined how these possible connections between narratives may be systematized by presenting some functions of the metadiegetic narrative: explanatory, prediction, thematic, persuasion, distraction and obstruction. In the case of Machado de Assis' story, we will observe a thematic relation between the presented levels. This thematic relation, according to Genette (1980, p. 233), implies "no spatio-temporal continuity between metadiegesis and diegesis: a relationship of contrast [...] or of analogy [...],"⁴² yet infers a direct and indispensable relationship to the chaining of the subsequent levels, since, when perceived by the reader, exerts an influence in the reading of the diegetic situation.

Until then, the narrator that conducted the short story was configured as a heterodiegetic narrator, that is, a narrator that was outside the diegesis and did not participate as an active character in the narrative, treating all the events in third person. From the moment that Cruz becomes the narrator, he assumes an autodiegetic position, narrating his own experience. The autodiegesis is important to build an uncanny element of the short story, since we have the narration of an empiric fact lived by the character himself, giving an increased testimonial credibility to what is being told (especially to other characters that are listening, but we could also consider how this credibility affects the contemplation of the short story as a whole). According to Souza (2011, p. 177, our translation), due to the narrator being a judge and the fantastic genre still needing to

⁴⁰ See footnote 39.

⁴¹ See footnote 39.

⁴² See footnote 39.

present a narrator capable of conceding credibility to what is told, there is “no one better than a judge to attract the adhesion of the listeners to his meta-empiric experience.”⁴³

Going back to the story, Cruz tells how, when still a young student in São Paulo, by his third year in college, he spent a vacation in Rio de Janeiro. Once there, he shared a two-story house with a man called Damasceno Rodrigues, an old doctor that was not practicing medicine and that lived there for three years. Cruz lived on the first floor and Damasceno on the second:

The second floor was previously an attic turned to the street; it was composed by a room, an alcove and little else. [...] *Everything there was as old and shattered as himself*; three incomplete chairs, a dresser, a sideboard, a table, some shreds of a rug linked by half-dozen strands, those were the furnishings of Damasceno Rodrigues’ house. The windows, two of them, were adorned with yellow calico curtains, largely spoiled. Over the dresser and the table there were a few nonsensical objects [...]. On the floor there were also newspapers and books spread all over. That was the refuge of the mysterious neighbor (Assis, 2014; our translation and emphasis).⁴⁴

The description creates an even more somber atmosphere, based on “an abandoned and neglected environment where even the objects look out of place and order, seemingly messed up” (Moraes; Menegotto, 2024, p. 442; our translation).⁴⁵ We see a configuration of the chronotope of the unfamiliar lodging at this second narrative level, this obscure setting in which the mysterious and supernatural event will occur to the judge. This description of the old doctor’s residence is somehow reflected on his own physical appearance and emotional state, since this is the place in which he spent most of his time: Cruz describes Damasceno as thin and hunched over, with an “angular and scrawny face, hollow eyes, stubbly hair, hairy and wrinkled hands” (Assis, 2014; our

⁴³ In the original: “[...] ninguém melhor que um juiz para atrair a adesão dos ouvintes à sua experiência meta-empírica.”

⁴⁴ In the original: “O segundo andar era antes um sótão puxado à rua; compunha-se de uma sala, uma alcova e pouco mais. [...] *Tudo ali era tão velho e alquebrado como ele*; três cadeiras incompletas, uma cômoda, um aparador, uma mesa, alguns farrapos de um tapete, ligados por meia dúzia de fios, tais eram as alfaías da casa de Damasceno Rodrigues. As janelas, que eram duas, adornavam-se com umas cortinas de chita amarela, rotas a espaços. Sobre a cômoda e a mesa havia alguns objetos disparatados; [...]. No chão também havia jornais e livros espalhados. Era ali o asilo do vizinho misterioso.”

⁴⁵ In the original: “[...] um ambiente abandonado e negligenciado, onde até mesmo os objetos parecem deslocados, fora de ordem, com aspecto de bagunçados.”

translation).⁴⁶ When serious, his features “gave the impression of a skull,” but when laughing, “there was a diabolical gesture” (Assis, 2014; our translation).⁴⁷

While staying at the house, Cruz has a few dialogues with Damasceno about weird and unusual subjects. After some time, the young man is informed by acquaintances that Damasceno had fallen very ill and had searched for him to tell a secret. Once Cruz visits him, the sick man asks him to get a small leather box kept in a drawer of his dresser. Inside, there is a stack of papers and, among them, a photo of a beautiful woman. That is how we pass to the third metadiegetic narrative level.

This time, Damasceno narrates how he met the lady in the photo at the interior of the state of Bahia. In his young days, he met a rich man that was also a medic and lived in a mill at the Jeremoabo region. This man is described by Damasceno as wise, taciturn, jealous, cautious and mistrustful. He was married to a pretty and modest woman called Lucinda: the same lady from the photo kept in the leather box. Gradually, Damasceno starts speculating that Lucinda’s excessive modesty was caused by her husband’s unmeasured jealousy. Damasceno’s compassion soon grows into love and he falls for her. However, Lucinda does not even look at him and every communication is marked by dry, monosyllabic words. Noticing that she was becoming sadder than usual, Damasceno decides to ask what is happening:

I don’t know what tone I had in my voice, but it is certain that Lucinda shivered and *raised her eyes to me. They crossed with mine, but said in that single minute* – what am I saying? In that single instant – *all the devastation of our souls [...]*. In the middle of that moral drowsiness that we were in, a voice thundered and called us back to the reality of life. At the same time, it appeared in front of us the figure of her husband. I never saw a most horrible expression in a human face! His wrath made of him a Medusa. [...] *He looked at me and at her.* [...] He bid farewell with a gesture; I tried to speak, *He imposed silence with his eyes* (Assis, 2014; our translation and emphasis).⁴⁸

⁴⁶ In the original: “[...] cara angulosa e descarnada, os olhos cavos, o cabelo hirsuto, as mãos peludas e rugosas.”

⁴⁷ In the original: “[...] sério, dava ares de caveira; rindo, havia nele um gesto diabólico [...].”

⁴⁸ In the original: “Não sei que tom havia em minha voz, e certo é que Lucinda estremeceu, e *levantou os olhos para mim. Cruzaram-se com os meus, mas disseram nesse único minuto* – que digo? Nesse único instante – *toda a devastação de nossas almas [...]*. No meio dessa sonolência moral em que nos achávamos, uma voz atroou e nos chamou à realidade da vida. Ao mesmo tempo achou-se defronte de nós a figura do marido. Nunca vi mais terrível expressão em rosto humano! A cólera fazia dele uma Medusa. [...] *Ele olhou para mim e para ela.* [...] Com um gesto despediu-me; quis falar, *ele impôs-me silêncio com os olhos.*”

Damasceno still tries to explain the situation some time after it, intending to placate the fury of the husband and so Lucinda does not suffer any kind of punishment. However, the man just laughs and does not answer. After a few weeks, Damasceno has to go back to Jeromoabo and, when asking about Lucinda to some locals, discovers she has died. He looks for the husband to know what had happened, and is surprisingly well received. The husband says he did well in coming to see Lucinda, who was alive but could die at any moment due to the punishment she had endured. Damasceno then tells that, as he reached the room,

I saw over a bed Lucinda's motionless body, and her moans were heartbreaking. "See," he said, "I only disciplined her eyes." The spectacle that revealed itself before me then, never, oh, I will forget it nevermore! *The eyes of the poor lady had disappeared; he had hollowed them, a day before, with a burning hot iron...* I recoiled frightened. The doctor held my pulse and claimed with all the anger compressed in his heart: "*The eyes transgressed, the eyes paid!*" (Assis, 2014; our translation and emphasis).⁴⁹

We can see from this excerpt that "the punishment imposed by the doctor to Lucinda reveals some characteristics of the [...] gothic as a fascinating attraction to the mystery of human malice, the perversions of the instincts and ethos" (Souza, 2011, p. 183; our translation).⁵⁰ The act of removing Lucinda's eyes so she could not look at anyone else establishes the terror in the short story, corroborated by the uncanny that comes after Damasceno's narrative. According to Bosi (1988, p. 65; our translation), "the act of looking means to direct the mind to an act of 'in-tentionality,'" ⁵¹ that is, the individual turns his attention to something that is an object of interest. Following this line of thought, to Lucinda's husband, the betrayal happened just by the look: since her eyes were guilty, they had to pay. The suffered punishment institutes in the narrative not just the fear of the supernatural, the unknown (which will appear at a later point), but also a fear of the real and the consequences of socially unacceptable acts.

⁴⁹ In the original: "Vi, sobre uma cama, o corpo imóvel de Lucinda, que gemia de modo a cortar o coração. 'Vê', disse ele, 'só lhe castiguei os olhos.' O espetáculo que se me revelou então, nunca, oh, nunca mais o esquecerei! *Os olhos da pobre moça tinham desaparecido; Ele os vazara, na véspera, com um ferro em brasa...* Recuei espavorido. O médico apertou-me os pulsos clamando com toda a raiva concentrada em seu coração: '*Os olhos delinquiram, os olhos pagaram!*'"

⁵⁰ In the original: "[...] o castigo que o médico impõe a Lucinda revela algumas características do [...] gótico como uma atração fascinante pelo mistério da maldade humana, das perversões dos instintos e do caráter."

⁵¹ In the original: "[...] o ato de olhar significa um dirigir a mente para um ato de 'in-tencionalidade'."

After narrating these events to young Cruz, Damasceno suddenly lifts his head and looks toward an empty wall in the room, screaming delirious “while his eyes, mortally fixed, *summarized all the terror that is possible to be contained within the human soul*” (Assis, 2014, our translation and emphasis).⁵² At this moment, he points to the wall with his thin and trembling finger, while Cruz follows with his eyes. The future judge then sees “standing up, alongside the wall, a livid woman, the same from the photo, with loose hair and the eyes... The eyes, these were two empty, bloody cavities” (Assis, 2014; our translation and emphasis).⁵³ Taken by fear, Cruz passes out and, after waking, is already in his own room. A day after this he receives the news that the sick doctor had died.

After his story, we go back to the first narrative level and the original chronotope, the circle of friends in the parlor. The judge is then questioned by Vasconcelos about all this, so Cruz presents an epilogue to his narration. When, at a later date, he decided to expose Damasceno’s story, the judge discovered that the man had never traveled to Bahia, that he had married at twenty three years old at Santa Catarina, having only left the state at thirty three, and the photo was, actually, the portrait of a niece that had died as a single woman. Thus, the entire episode confessed by Damasceno could possibly be no more than a delusion or a lie invented by the old doctor.

This question of Damasceno’s possible madness, perceived by Cruz since they met, works as a resource that creates doubt on the veracity of the doctor’s narrative not just to the characters, but also to the reader. Consequently,

[...] one of the aesthetic reasons why Machado de Assis probably invests in Damasceno’s madness, configured by his grotesque features, by the ominous setting created around him and his erratic behavior, is the fact that mental disturbance, by itself a matter of public uneasiness, ends up incrementing or deepening the disturbing atmosphere and the supernatural elements in Cruz’s report —not counting [...] the fact that it serves as a basis to mitigate the true, fantastic nature of the events (Waki, 2019, p. 34; our translation).⁵⁴

⁵² In the original: “[...] enquanto os *olhos*, mortalmente fixos, *resumiam todo o terror que é possível conter a alma humana*.”

⁵³ In the original: “[...] de pé, junto à parede, vi uma mulher lívida, a mesma do retrato, com os cabelos soltos, e os olhos... Os olhos, esses eram duas cavidades vazias e ensanguentadas.”

⁵⁴ In the original: “[...] um dos motivos estéticos pelos quais Machado de Assis provavelmente investe na loucura de Damasceno, configurada pela sua aparência grotesca, pela ambientação funesta que ele cria ao seu redor e pelo seu comportamento um tanto errático, é o fato de que os distúrbios mentais, sendo por si só fatores de inquietação pública, acabam por aprofundar ou incrementar a atmosfera perturbadora e os eventos sobrenaturais do relato de Cruz – sem contar [...] o fato de servir como base para mitigar a verdadeira natureza fantástica dos acontecimentos.”

Even if Cruz's narrative focuses on the phantom that he witnessed, as he touches the theme of madness we invariably tend to doubt his vision. Damasceno himself, in one of his conversations with Cruz, says that the moon is just a product of the retina. The old doctor explains that, in some days of the month, the human eye suffers a kind of nervous contraction that produces the lunar phenomenon, so the moon would be something inside the human eyes themselves. Therefore, "if the moon is an illusion of the senses [...], maybe Lucinda's apparition could be another one" (Moraes; Menegotto, 2024, p. 445; our translation),⁵⁵ especially if we take into account that Cruz's disposition was altered after the story told by Damasceno, and the environment itself could have contributed to it – we should remember the uncanniness caused by the chronotope of the unfamiliar lodging, a setting that represents the temporary suspension of the known world and its replacement by the unfamiliar and obscure. Furthermore, unconsciously or not, at various points of his narration, Cruz remarks the moments in which Damasceno talked or acted deranged, as well as establishes certain relationship

[...] between the possibility of Damasceno's madness and the space in which he lives. His flirtations with insanity amplify the sensation that the line between real and supernatural is fragile, heightening the enigmatic atmosphere of the short story [...] and emphasizing mainly the emotional instability and the terrible health of the doctor [...] (Moraes; Menegotto, 2024, p. 448; our translation).⁵⁶

From this perspective, there are elements of uncertainty and hesitation permeating both narrations, by Cruz and Damasceno. Both uncertainty and hesitation are then transmitted to other characters and to the readers themselves, an aspect also imperative to the uncanny. It is why "we can verify a contamination of real and unreal facts, plausible and implausible are mixed, madness and lucidity do not oppose themselves, but overlap" (Souza, 2011, p. 185; our translation).⁵⁷ Thus, the uncanny consists exactly in the inability of having a resolution to Cruz's case, as, at the end of his narration, he leaves it clear that

⁵⁵ In the original: "[...] se a lua é uma ilusão dos sentidos [...], talvez a aparição de Lucinda também seja."

⁵⁶ In the original: "[...] entre a possibilidade da loucura do personagem Damasceno e o espaço em que ele vive. Seu flerte com a insanidade amplia a sensação de que a linha entre o real e o sobrenatural é tênue, aumentando a atmosfera enigmática do conto [...] e que enfatiza, principalmente, a instabilidade emocional e a péssima saúde do médico [...]."

⁵⁷ In the original: "[...] podemos verificar que há uma contaminação dos fatos reais e irreais, verossímil e inverossímil se misturam, loucura e lucidez não se contrapõem, mas se imbricam."

he cannot decipher the enigma of having seen Lucinda's ghost, even if, apparently, Damasceno's story could be nothing more than an invention or delusion. According to Souza (2011, p. 186), it is precisely this aspect that "concurr[s] to our comprehension or classification of "Sem olhos" in the realm of the fantastic,"⁵⁸ since it makes us doubt our perception of the real.

Mr. Vasconcelos gives a simple resolution to the judge's case, in accordance to what we have discussed before: "the madness of the ailing man was contagious and made you see what he was supposedly seeing" (Assis, 2014; our translation).⁵⁹ After this assertion, Cruz says that it would be better, then, if the story of Lucinda was true; following that, he does something weird: gets closer to Maria do Céu and asks if, after this story, she believes in ghosts. This act is unexpected because it was not just Maria do Céu who doubted the existence of the supernatural. Her husband, Bento Soares, also doubted, besides Mr. Vasconcelos and bachelor Antunes. It would make more sense if the question was directed towards the entire group; however, if the direction of the question was already singular, Maria do Céu's behavior is even more unexpected: she was with "her eyes down" and "when the judge drove her the word, she shivered, stood up" (Assis, 2014; our translation).⁶⁰ Maria do Céu does not answer the judge's question and, apparently, her shivering is caused by fear, a behavior contrasting with her initial posture, as she was the one who asserted she was afraid of nothing and no one.

Gonçalves (2016, p. 52; our translation) writes that "Maria do Céu's final reaction mirrors Lucinda, who, afraid of her husband, shivered and lowered her eyes when seeing Damasceno."⁶¹ There is something in the story told by Cruz that, if it does not frighten, at least brings discomfort to the woman. The act of lowering her eyes like Lucinda, as emphasized by the narrator, gives us a possible parallel between the first and third narrative levels. If Maria do Céu's behavior was not enough, "The bachelor did the same; but went for a window – *maybe to take some air* – maybe to reflect in time about *the risk of interpreting someday a Hebraism of the scriptures*" (Assis, 2014; our translation and

⁵⁸ In the original: "[...] concorre para que compreendamos ou classifiquemos 'Sem olhos' no universo do fantástico."

⁵⁹ In the original: "[...] o desvario do doente foi contagioso, e fez com que o senhor visse o que ele supunha ver."

⁶⁰ In the original: "[...] seus olhos baixos [...]"; "[...] quando o desembargador lhe dirigiu a palavra, estremeceu, ergueu-se."

⁶¹ In the original: "[...] a reação final de Maria do Céu espelha a reação de Lucinda, que, por medo de seu marido, estremeceu e baixava os olhos ao ver Damasceno."

emphasis).⁶² This excerpt that describes Antunes' reaction is interesting because shows his tension and also presents to us two suppositions given by the narrator himself: the first is simply to take some air, but the second suggests a risk in interpreting *a Hebraism of the scriptures*.

This conjecture is very suggestive because it also makes a direct parallel to Damasceno. When the old doctor met Cruz, he was himself trying to interpret a biblical text from the Hebraic original. We can certainly suppose a link between Antunes and Damasceno that goes beyond the reading of the scriptures and concerns their actions as men in love with beautiful ladies with seductive eyes – and married ones at that. Indeed,

[...] if, at the beginning of the short story, we get a glimpse of the discreet licentious attitudes that connect the erotic and illicit interests of Maria do Céu and bachelor Antunes, at the end of the story, after the revelation that Damasceno is what he is as a consequence of an equally illicit passion, we see how the couple from Rio reexamine those attitudes. Not that this self-examination is some kind of effective moral awareness, no: this examination of conscience is in truth a self-preservation calculation, of reaction to fear, of deliberation in respect to what may in practice happen to them if Bento Soares comes to react against their erotic intentions (Waki, 2019, pp. 37-38; translation).⁶³

Maria do Céu and the bachelor are not affected as much by the supernatural character of Cruz's story, but by the possible consequences of their acts. The fear they feel is a fear of the other and of what could be made if they are discovered. According to França (2011, p. 59; our translation), fear is "intimately linked to the mechanisms of self-preservation,"⁶⁴ be it a fear of the supernatural or a fear of the real. In the first case, the fear of the supernatural is associated to the uncertainty and danger, stimulating elements of uncanny narratives, popular and literary. "The unknown represents a constant source of dangerous and malevolent possibilities. The combination between the sensation of endangerment, the intuition of evil, the inevitable enchantment of the marvelous and

⁶² In the original: "O bacharel fez o mesmo; mas foi dali a uma janela — talvez tomar ar — talvez refletir a tempo no risco de vir a interpretar algum dia um hebraísmo das Escrituras."

⁶³ In the original: "[...] se, no início do conto, nós temos um vislumbre das atitudes discretamente licenciosas que unem os interesses eróticos e ilícitos de Maria do Céu aos do Bacharel Antunes, no fim do conto, após a revelação de que Damasceno é o que é em decorrência de uma paixão também ilícita, vemos como o casal carioca reexamina tais atitudes. Não que esse exame de consciência seja uma espécie de conscientização moral efetiva – não: esse exame de consciência é antes uma espécie de cálculo de autopreservação, de reação ao medo, de ponderação a respeito do que lhes pode acontecer na prática caso Bento Soares venha a querer reagir contra as suas intenções eróticas."

⁶⁴ In the original: "[...] intimamente ligado aos mecanismos de autopreservação."

curiosity possesses a vitality inherent to the human race itself” (França, 2011, p. 62).⁶⁵ The fear of the unknown resides, then, in its unpredictability and the incapability of facing it in a rational way, being this the fear that Cruz feels against the apparition of Lucinda. In the second case, fear of the real, present especially in modernity, rises from the false expectation of freedom and safety present in the social coexistence of the daily life, since this order may be torn by the other. It is the sensation of fear for what man himself is capable of doing, as “we learn that monstrosities are not just committed by ‘monsters’” (França, 2011, p. 63; our translation).⁶⁶ An example of this is the violence itself suffered by Lucinda, which provokes fear in Antunes and Maria do Céu: fear of what an enraged and supposedly betrayed husband could do.

Thereby, we notice a parallel between the metadiegetic narrative levels, especially in respect to the first and third levels. We have a husband with resolution and gravitas (Bento Soares and Lucinda’s husband), a young man in love (bachelor Antunes and Damasceno) and a beautiful wife with equally beautiful eyes (Maria do Céu and Lucinda). Accordingly, Cruz’s narration provokes an unbalance and rupture in the established social order not just for its supernatural character, but by the physical and moral punishment imposed to Lucinda, since it possibly connects itself to the reality of Maria do Céu and Antunes. It is in this outcome that, as said by Moraes and Menegotto (2024, p. 447; our translation), “the discursive strategy of parallelism completes its cycle,”⁶⁷ once this conduction of the plot directs the reader towards the ambiguity and uncertainty of the narrative. Furthermore, the chronotope in the frame-narrative (*the nocturnal reunion of the high society, in a parlor, sharing horror stories*) ends up fulfilling, beyond its role in the configuration of the fantastic, also the role that we have seen in Balzac’s and Stendhal’s (and realist literature in general) parlors and salons: again, as said by Bakhtin (1981, p. 246), “this is where *dialogues* happen, something that acquires extraordinary importance in the novel, revealing the character, ‘ideas’ and ‘passions’ of the heroes.”⁶⁸

Under this view, the comprehension that we reach of the idea of fantastic, as present in Machado de Assis’ short story, is closer to contemporary discussions such as

⁶⁵ In the original: “O desconhecido representaria uma fonte constante de possibilidades perigosas e malévolas. A combinação entre a sensação do perigo, a intuição do mal, o inevitável encanto do maravilhoso e a curiosidade possuiria uma vitalidade inerente à própria raça humana.”

⁶⁶ In the original: “[...] aprendemos que monstrosidades não são cometidas apenas por ‘monstros’.”

⁶⁷ In the original: “[...] a estratégia discursiva do paralelismo completa seu ciclo.”

⁶⁸ Bakhtin, 1981, p. 246, emphasis by the author. (For reference, see footnote 1.)

the one made by David Roas in *Behind the Frontiers of the Real: A Definition of the Fantastic* than what we traditionally find inspired by Tzvetan Todorov's theory, despite how In the original: with the latter had a fundamental role in the comprehension of fantastic literature. According to Roas (2018),⁶⁹ in fantastic literature, the supernatural conflicts with reality, but that is not limited to a mere description of a supernatural event. On the contrary, the supernatural element, when inserted in the story, disrupts the pre-established order and represents a threat to our worldviews and to reality. Todorov (1975),⁷⁰ on the other hand, considers fantastic literature mainly from the uncertainty and feeling of the strange by the reader, from the hesitation that this one feels between natural and supernatural as a condition to the existence of the fantastic.

In accordance to Roas' (2018)⁷¹ perspective, we perceive in *Sem olhos* an aesthetic conception of the fantastic that is tied to Realism. The elements highlighted here heighten the supernatural atmosphere of the short story and, as a consequence of the use of frame-narratives, the ambiguity and mystery become even more intense for the interpretation of the story and lands it on a fantastic terrain. Which is why the Realism in the short story "converts itself in a structural necessity"⁷² (Souza, 2011, p. 186) of the fantastic present therein, which "means affirming that the common idea of situating the fantastic on the terrain of the illogical and the dreamlike is abolished, that is, the fantastic cannot be conceived as an opposing pole to realist literature" (Souza, 2011, p. 186; our translation).⁷³

Then, the apparent severance between realist and fantastic aesthetics is unmade in *Sem olhos* and expresses the literary perspicacity of Machado de Assis by bringing the understanding of the real fused to the supernatural. Besides settling layers of ambiguity and subtle ironies, his narrative reflects the uncertainty of the perception that his characters have of reality; as described by Roas (2018),⁷⁴ it is like conceiving the unreal as real and the real as a possible unreality. This happens because Machado de Assis

⁶⁹ ROAS, David. *Behind the Frontiers of the Real: A Definition of the Fantastic*. London: Palgrave Pivot, 2018.

⁷⁰ TODOROV, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975.

⁷¹ See footnote 69.

⁷² In the original: "[...] se converte em uma necessidade estrutural [...]."

⁷³ In the original: "[...] significa afirmar que a ideia comum de situar o fantástico no terreno do ilógico e do onírico é abolida, ou seja, o fantástico não deve ser concebido em um polo oposto ao da literatura realista."

⁷⁴ See footnote 62.

presents a world and a natural, prosaic situation in which two frame-narratives are inserted and, in one of them, a supernatural phenomenon erupts and contrasts with the presented reality and the established order. The parallelism between metadiegetic levels envelops a discursive strategy in which we are directed towards uncertainty and ambiguity – by the end of the short story, there is a suspenseful atmosphere among the characters in which their own reality is threatened.

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Received January 07, 2025

Accepted April 03, 2025

Statement of Author's Contribution

Both authors participated, in a significant way, of every stage in the elaboration of this paper, being equally responsible for every aspect, from its conception to its writing and revision. During its conception, the selection of the short story and the initial writing of its analysis were done by Larissa Ingrid Pinheiro de França Bezerra, based on previously held discussions between the authors; Newton de Castro Pontes selected the initial theoretical foundation (such as the concepts of chronotope and fantastic, along with their references), which, after further discussions, was expanded again by França, who also included references to more critical approaches to the short story. The first versions of the paper were written by França and expanded by Pontes (but in both cases accompanied by discussions between the authors). Both authors actively worked on adjustments and revisions of the submitted version, having approved its final text.

Research Data and Other Materials Availability

The contents underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.

Reviews

Due to the commitment assumed by *Bakhtiniana. Revista de Estudos do Discurso* [*Bakhtiniana. Journal of Discourse Studies*] to Open Science, this journal only publishes reviews that have been authorized by all involved.

Review I

The short story “Sem olhos,” by Machado de Assis, analyzed in this paper, was published in 1876. As a literary critic, Machado de Assis wrote, in the 1873 essay *Instinto de nacionalidade* [Nationality Instinct], the following remark regarding the short story as a literary form: “It is a hard genre, despite its apparent easiness, and I believe this same appearance harms it, pushing back writers and not receiving the attention that it deserves by the public” (Assis, J. M. M. *Obras completas*. v. 3. Rio de Janeiro: Ed. José Aguilar, 1962, p. 806, our translation).⁷⁵ The paper – Realism and Fantastic in the Short Story Sem Olhos, by Machado de Assis: A Chronotopical Investigation – presents an analysis that shows, by studying Machado de Assis’ performance of the act of writing, how the founder of *Academia Brasileira de Letras* [Brazilian Academy of Letters] ABL, in an environment of passions and romantic characters, created roles, built sceneries and dramatized manners, customs, values from a time subverted by images involved in apparitions, nightmares in manifestations that translate fanciful impressions among the characters

⁷⁵ In the original: “É gênero difícil, a despeito da sua aparente facilidade, e creio que essa mesma aparência lhe faz mal, afastando-se dele os escritores, e não lhe dando, penso eu, o público toda a atenção de que ele é muitas vezes credor.”

involved, between afflictions, excesses that instigate in the main character fear and terror. The paper, as proposed, evaluates well the literary composition of a short narrative involved with effects of meaning of the fantastic taken from passions that are located on chronotopes distributed between two situations narrated by Machado de Assis' short story "Sem olhos," from 1876. APPROVED.

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Reviewed on February 06, 2025.

Review II

The paper presents consistency in its choices of theoretical and methodological approaches. The title is clear and adequate, preparing the reader to a reflective path developed throughout the text. The objective of analyzing the fantastic in the realist narrative by Machado de Assis through the category of the chronotope, specifically in the short story *Sem olhos*, is reached in a grounded, well written form, with coherence and good theoretical basis, besides having the research aligned to contemporary reflections that contribute to the comprehension of many creative aspects of Assis' writings.

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Reviewed on January 24, 2025.

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