

Narrative Voice, Point of View, and Characterization in Graciliano Ramos's *Vidas Sêcas*

Virtually all criticism concerning *Vidas Sêcas* includes a discussion of its multiple point of view format and its use of free indirect style. It is generally agreed that the shifting points of view provide a multifaceted view of reality, and that the free indirect style technique is a verisimilar method of presenting the thoughts of the inarticulate protagonists, as well as being a means of combining third person objectivity with first person subjectivity. These observations, however, show a tendency to treat narrative voice and point of view as a single phenomenon, thereby blurring the distinction between the two. Yet the difference is an important one.

In this vein, it is useful to keep in mind the structuralist division of the narrative into its basic components: the story (the content plane including the characters, setting, and chain of events) and the discourse (the expression plane by which the story is transmitted). Seymour Chatman elaborates on the domain of each by distinguishing between point of view and narrative voice: point of view pertains to the perspectives of the characters and therefore resides in the story, while narrative voice is the means of conveying that point of view to the reader and thus is an element of the discourse (153-4). The realm of the discourse's narrative voice, then, encompasses all forms of expression employed in any text: narrative description or commentary; verbalized speech such as monologue, dialogue, or soliloquy; interior monologue; free indirect style; etc. It is by way of these various narrative voice features that the reader comes in contact with the perspectives of the characters. Although they function on distinct planes within the text, narrative voice and point of view often work in conjunction to establish and develop the characters, as is the case in *Vidas Sêcas*.

Overall, the discourse of *Vidas Sêcas* is characterized by a covert form of narration in which the formal narrator remains in the background while the thoughts of the protagonists become the focal point of the story. This effect is achieved through the use of free indirect style as the predominant mode of expression within the text. Overt narration (by the formal narrator) and direct discourse (among the characters) are kept to a minimum.

In general, the characters of *Vidas Sêcas* use direct discourse for communication purposes, which often results in unsuccessful attempts at understanding and being understood. This verbalization is supplemented by sub-verbal gestures and grunts which help to compensate for their sparse vocabulary. Brief monologues both external and internal, show the

characters' attempts to verbalize and/or reinforce ideas that are in the process of being formulated. The world of these embryonic thoughts is presented to the reader through free indirect style. Given the inarticulate nature of the protagonists, the forms of direct discourse (monologue, dialogue, interior monologue) are used sparingly since they are *verbalized* manifestations of thought. Conversely, free indirect style is used as the primary means of presentation since it allows for the representation of *pre-verbalized* ideas, impressions, and images. This pre-verbal level constitutes the mental world of the protagonists, and their characters unfold primarily within the realm of their developing thought processes. Therefore, the discourse makes extensive use of free indirect style to represent the perceptual (sensorial) and conceptual (ideological) perspectives of the protagonists (Chatman, 152). Of the two, the conceptual point of view dominates and functions as the prime characterization device of this text. Character development is largely measured by the mental growth experienced by the individual as his worldview gradually changes and he redefines his place in society. Nevertheless, the perceptual perspective also plays an important role in establishing the oppressive nature of the physical and societal atmosphere as felt by the protagonists.

This technique has the additional advantage of reducing emotional distance between the reader and the character thus portrayed. This is necessary in *Vidas Sêcas* because an empathic response must be cultivated in the literate, urban reader for the educationally and socially deficient protagonists. The disparity of situation between the reader and the characters must be counterbalanced so that the reader does not look down upon them with pity from a superior position, but rather, views them compassionately as fellow human beings. As Wayne C. Booth has observed, the sustained use of a sympathetic inside view of a character is a highly successful method of inducing a parallel emotional response in the reader (245–49). Interior views, which grant the reader access to the thoughts and emotions of a character, are achieved in *Vidas Sêcas* primarily through free indirect style. Indeed, the effect is intensified in this text by denying interior views to characters outside of Fabiano's family. Each of the five protagonists (Fabiano, Vitória, the sons, and Baleia) is afforded a compassionate inside view, while all the other characters are presented solely through their words and actions. Emotional distance between the reader and the various characters is thereby controlled through the manipulation of granted and withheld inside views. The reader never enters the mind of any character outside the family circle. This sympathy-producing device is used exclusively with the protagonists, thereby creating a contrast between the reader's intense familiarity with the feelings and attitudes of the main characters, and his lack of such information concerning the other characters. This device causes the reader to commiserate with the central

figures as they contend with the bewildering and hostile world of strangers whose motivations are not known and therefore can only be speculated upon.

Furthermore, the plot of *Vidas Sêcas* is entirely revealed through a series of these single-perspective inside views. This constitutes the discourse order of the text, and the reader must independently ascertain the plot order of events. This situation has led several critics to comment on the fragmentary nature of this work. It has been stated that *Vidas Sêcas* is a collection of autonomous short stories which can be read either individually or as a group (Câmara 106-7). Also, the structure has been credited as being a means of providing the reader with a disconnected view of reality identical to that which is experienced by the characters (Caccese 158). Nevertheless, the reader does indeed have a distinct advantage over the characters in that he is able to regard each of the individual perspectives in relation to the others. To read the various chapters as isolated entities would destroy the unity provided by this superior perspective. Whereas the characters are restricted to the narrow confines of their fixed center viewpoints, the reader enjoys a multiple perspective overview of the situation. The reader is exposed to the various plot events from the perspectives of the individual characters, and since these perspectives are conveyed through free indirect style, the plot events carry the emotional impact felt by the character involved. In addition, each protagonist's inside view provides important character-revealing information about the other family members. Thus, the collaboration between narrative voice and point of view helps to simultaneously advance the plot and outline the characters.

Chatman advances a definition of character as a paradigm of traits which exist on the story level and are communicated through the discourse to the reader in such a way that he can reconstruct the characters from announced or implied evidence (119-38). This requires an active participation on the part of the reader, who must glean these character traits over the course of the narrative. In *Vidas Sêcas* this task is as difficult as it is necessary. Without providing overt narrative commentary concerning the characters, the novel relies heavily on the reader's inferential abilities to reconstruct the characters from the thoughts and actions they exhibit. This reconstruction process is made possible through the extensive inside views, which allow the reader to enter the minds of the individual family members and to experience their single-dimensional perceptual and conceptual perspectives. By following the mental progression of each character, the reader is able to view the various isolated perspectives as they interact to confirm, modify, or contradict one another. In this way, the reader has access to information which would have been unavailable to him had the text been limited to inside views of a single character.

In summary, point of view and narrative voice work in conjunction to achieve effects which contribute to the development of character and plot

in *Vidas Sêcas*. Abundant use of free indirect style coupled with selected instances of interior monologue combine to produce a narrative which is overwhelmingly oriented toward inside views. This discursive strategy builds reader sympathy towards the family members, as well as establishes an internal drama of their unfolding mental awareness evidenced in their changing conceptual perspectives. In addition, the juxtaposition of the various restricted viewpoints sets up a network of individual fixed points which, when considered together, present a complex picture of the characters and their reality.

Of the five protagonists, Fabiano engages in the largest number of story events, and therefore the sparse plot revolves around his actions. Furthermore, he has the largest percentage of inside views and experiences the most dramatic character growth of all the protagonists. In addition, his presence is strongly felt even in the narrative segments focusing on the other family members since each of their inside views centers on Fabiano or relates to him in some way. Thus, Fabiano emerges as the main character of the text, and as such he figures prominently in the numerous critical works done on *Vidas Sêcas*. Among these are three fine studies by scholars who examine Fabiano's concept of human dignity: Russell G. Hamilton discusses the role of Fabiano's developing desire to rectify the injustices of authority, and how this idea represents a germ of hope in his existence; David A. Goldin expresses an equally optimistic view by noting the positive influence of seu Tomás on Fabiano, as reflected in his decision to spare the life of the *soldado amarelo*; and Ronald M. Harmon deals with Fabiano's growing political consciousness in an examination of the ways that Ramos's ideological stance is stylistically communicated to the reader (235–47). These critical essays focus on Fabiano's conceptual perspective in terms of his confrontations with authority figures. However, it is also important to examine how the perceptual and conceptual perspectives of the protagonists work in conjunction to reveal the social dynamics of the family circle as well as its relationship with outsiders. This matter will be addressed in the following discussion of the various ways that narrative voice and point of view collaborate to define Fabiano's character.

Apart from the infrequent occasions when Fabiano engages in other-directed dialogue with little or no success, he is presented to the reader through sympathetic inside views. Upon examining these inside views, a pattern emerges which is characterized by three distinct narrative voice features. First and foremost, Fabiano's mental world is represented through liberal and sustained passages of free indirect style which depict his preverbal perceptual impressions and conceptual thoughts. This technique, which allows the reader to openly view his thoughts as they are in the process of being formed, is vital to the development of Fabiano's character since it enables the reader to experience his growing mental awareness

over the course of the text. This mental realm is marked by extreme vacillations of opinion concerning his concept of the world and his place in it. Each statement is promptly undercut by an opposing argument, thereby demonstrating the mental conflict he is experiencing. Indeed, it is the presence of this uncertainty and questioning that indicates his potential for growth. Interspersed in the free indirect style are brief interior monologue sentences which serve to crystallize his thoughts. These internally verbalized statements are a preparatory step to his external verbalizations, which generally consist of a single succinct assertion summarizing his conclusions. These spoken statements, however, are not intended to be overheard; they are merely externally verbalized projections of thought. Since their aim is not that of communication—dialogue serves that function—they are an extremely shortened version of the soliloquy. Thus, free indirect style, interior monologue, and soliloquy are the principle narrative voice vehicles used to present Fabiano's point of view to the reader.

The clearest example of this pattern is seen in his second confrontation with the *soldado amarelo*. Here his intense internal debate concerning the fate of his enemy is presented entirely through free indirect style punctuated by one-line interior monologues. In this chapter Fabiano's perceptual perspective of the man's obvious physical and moral inferiority is contrasted against his conceptual perspective of the *soldado amarelo* as a representative of authority. The free indirect style technique grants the reader access to his mind as he grapples with this paradox. The various steps of his mental struggle are marked by his interior statements. At first he is unable to reconcile the disparity between the *soldado amarelo's* physical stature and his official status, and therefore Fabiano negates the part of the man that he can see and reasons that the half hidden behind the tree must be much larger. This is a prime example of perceptual and conceptual perspectives working together toward a rendering of the character's worldview. However, Fabiano immediately and forcefully rejects this notion by chastising himself mentally with the words "Como a gente pensa coisas bestas!" (102). Having established the fact that the abstract concept of authority can indeed have imperfect and weak representatives, Fabiano must now decide if he should seek revenge for the injustices he suffered at the hands of the *soldado amarelo*. Fabiano's pride is at stake here, and he wonders if his lack of decisive action reflects badly on his manliness. Repenting having thrown down the machete, he looks on it as a useless weapon. Then he suddenly reasserts his courage by mentally saying "Quem disse que não servia?" (106). Now that Fabiano is secure in his physical superiority, he can make the magnanimous gesture of allowing his enemy to leave unharmed. Fabiano realizes that personal revenge against a weakling is beneath his dignity, and furthermore, that such an act would be an offense against ideal authority which is distinguishable

from the corrupt functionaries involved in its application. Fabiano's mental resolution of the entire problem is externalized by a characteristically brief observation: "Governo é governo" (107).

A variation of this pattern involves the omission of interior monologue, as seen in the important chapter following the chance meeting just mentioned. Here the image of the physically weak but powerful exploiting the physically strong but powerless is further explored. In this segment Fabiano struggles to make sense of Vitória's comment that the birds "levavam o resto da água, queriam matar o gado" (108). At first unable to understand the concept, he later comprehends not only its specific application to the birds, but also its metaphorical association with authority figures who exploit others for personal gain. While he is physically looking at the birds, his mind finally makes the cognitive leap necessary to define them as symbols of oppression. Once again perceptual and conceptual perspectives merge. As he fights against the birds, he voices his assessment of them as "pestes" and "miseráveis." He also engages in what for Fabiano constitutes a very long soliloquy of thirty words in which he overtly makes the correlation between them and unjust authority. While watching the birds he says aloud: "Fabiano, meu filho, tem coragem. Tem vergonha, Fabiano. Mata o soldado amarelo. Os soldados amarelos são uns desgraçados que precisam morrer. Mata o soldado amarelo e os que mandam nele" (111). Though he shoots at the birds, he succeeds in killing only a small percentage. He realizes the futility of physical force against insurmountable power. The physically superior cattle are killed by the birds, just as Fabiano is mistreated by the *soldado amarelo*. The isolated components of power may be weak, but together they create a force which no individual, no matter how strong, can overcome.

This pattern variation is also seen elsewhere. In the chapter entitled "Festa," Fabiano's physical discomfort resulting from the heat and his restrictive clothing is matched by his emotional uneasiness with the social setting in which he finds himself. Here his perceptual perspective reflects the oppressive nature of both the physical and the social environment. During the festival, Fabiano mentally extends the boundaries of unjust authority to include members of the town who take advantage of hard-working but ignorant people like himself. His courage is sufficiently strengthened by liquor to allow him to defiantly voice vague challenges aimed at corrupt authority figures in general. However, his faculties are not so dulled that he risks being overheard by anyone. Another example is seen in chapter two where Fabiano alternates between feelings of pride in his abilities, and feelings of personal insignificance and inferiority due to his ignorance and economic situation. He summarizes the distinct positions by declaring himself to be either "um homem" or "um bicho." Once again his words are not for the ears of others. Aside from these few

instances which dispense with the interior monologue stage, the dominant pattern—free indirect style, interior monologue, and soliloquy—prevails in Fabiano's inside views.

As Hamilton, Goldin, and Harmon have ably demonstrated, Fabiano experiences a gradual evolution in his conception of humanity and personal dignity. Indeed, his unjust imprisonment suddenly jars him from a lifetime of passivity. This event serves as a catalyst which causes him to doubt the validity of his established belief system, thereby opening the avenue for growth and change. The preponderance of free indirect style transforms the reader into a firsthand witness to Fabiano's mental maturation as he posits arguments, poses questions, explores possibilities, and comes to realizations. His search for self-worth is linked to an emerging appreciation for the value and power of words. Though he always had respected and attempted to emulate people with a command of language, he originally was distrustful of words and books because he felt they strengthened the mind at the expense of the body (as with seu Tomás), and because "se aprendesse qualquer coisa, necessaria aprender mais, e nunca ficaria satisfeito" (21). Curiosity and ideas, then, were to be discouraged in favor of blind obedience to authority. After his imprisonment, however, he begins to realize that formal education and the capacity to use language effectively have positive uses: they are tools for organizing one's thoughts; they represent a means to understand and communicate with those in power; and they can be used as a counterattack against those who abuse their positions of authority. This last function is employed with enviable success by *sinha Terta*, who rises in Fabiano's estimation to equal that of seu Tomás. Consequently, his experience in jail is a pivotal episode in Fabiano's character development since it effects a change in his general cognitive approach to life, and marks the beginning of Fabiano's movement away from resignation of his fate in the direction of action to alter his situation—a gradual process of mental growth which does not reach fruition until the end of the text. Indeed, the ongoing alterations in his conceptual perception prepares him for the suggestion to move to the city made by *Vitória* in the final chapter of the novel. Fabiano is no longer resigned to his lot, and he has come to realize that education and language rather than physical might are the most effective weapons in the fight against social injustice. The city affords his children the opportunity for an education, and he recognizes this fact when *Vitória* mentions it. The move to the city will require him to abandon his occupation, his only source of self-respect, and to live in a hostile urban environment. However, this personal sacrifice will be made to insure the future of the next generation.

The degree of change in his outlook toward life in general is evidenced in the contrast between Fabiano of the first two chapters and Fabiano at the close of the novel. In the opening chapter his personal frustration

manifests itself in extreme anger toward his son who refuses to continue walking, so much so that “Fabiano desejou matá-lo. Tinha o coração grosso, queria responsabilizar alguém pela sua desgraça. . . . Pelo espírito atribulado do sertanejo passou a idéia de abandonar o filho naquele descampado” (10). In the final chapter his frustrations have been directed toward changing his situation in order to benefit his children at his own expense. Similarly, the silence and lack of communication in the first chapter contrast sharply with the lengthy conversation that Vitória initiates and Fabiano sustains in the closing chapter. Here the speech act itself is seen as a supportive measure to combat reality, to share ideas, and to impart hope. This is especially evident in the matter of the waterhole. Even though Vitória has doubts as to its existence, she communicates hope to her husband, whose desires soon turn the waterhole into a reality. As they continue to speak to one another, the waterhole and the possibility of a better life in the city become entwined. Both represent a potentiality which may not, and probably will not, be realized. Yet Fabiano and Vitória are ready to venture a try. They have substituted action for passive submission. Fabiano no longer wishes to teach his sons blind obedience to authority, and he has no more fears of their curiosity. On the contrary, he wants to encourage their verbal and cognitive development. For Fabiano, school has taken on a positive connotation which it formerly lacked.

The more enlightened outlook is the result of the various realizations Fabiano experiences throughout the text, each of which are rendered in free indirect style. Although this technique is sufficient to portray Fabiano's personal evolution, the multiple point of view format contributes an additional dimension to his character by allowing the other protagonists' perceptions of him to round out those aspects of his character insufficiently covered in his own reflections. For example, the younger son's role in establishing Fabiano's character is of considerable importance. This boy's hero worship of his father confers a dignity on Fabiano and his work which is not emphasized elsewhere. The reader looks through the eyes of the child and feels his wonderment as he watches Fabiano—impressively dressed in leather and wearing spurs—ride and dominate a wild horse. Inspired by this spectacle, the youngster later attempts to imitate his father's accomplishments; and indeed he is worthy of emulation as a capable worker and a master of his craft. Seeing Fabiano from the younger son's perceptual and conceptual perspectives affords the reader a view of Fabiano downplayed in his own thoughts. Each time Fabiano takes pride in his abilities, he immediately withdraws this favorable view of himself by dwelling on his many limitations. In this chapter, however, the reader is provided with an unqualified testimony to Fabiano's prowess as a *vaqueiro*. In lieu of the inarticulate and socially inept peasant, we see a man of heroic proportions. This example of his skill on the job where he is comfortable in his rural environment helps to counterbalance the negative and

restrictive aspects of his behavior. In addition, the reader is better able to appreciate the magnitude of Fabiano's personal sacrifice at the close of the story. The decision to move to the city means that he will have to leave the rural setting where he feels competent and assured in order to enter an unfamiliar world in which he will be awkward and uncomfortable.

Turning now to the interior views of the older son, we see his emerging fascination with the magic of words which parallels Fabiano's own growing awareness of the power of language. Both man and son are becoming cognizant of the narrow confines of their linguistic world. The boy's sudden realization that all things have names is similar to his father's discovery that language can be used to fight against authority. However, since the boy is unaware of Fabiano's changing attitude, he merely judges him on his performance. In the storytelling incident in the chapter entitled "Inverno," the boy's visual perspective is hampered by the lack of light. Since he cannot see Fabiano's hand gestures, he must rely on hearing the words alone in order to understand the story's meaning. However, Fabiano is insufficiently skilled as a communicator to make the story clear without the visual accompaniments. Upon retelling the story, Fabiano alters it. This causes him to drop in the older son's estimation because he could not control language, but rather, he let it control him.

Therefore, the younger son's conception of his father is based on Fabiano's ease at dominating his physical world, whereas the older son's view of Fabiano stems from his failure to manipulate his social environment. Both opinions are valid but limited; only the reader is able to incorporate them into the larger picture of Fabiano's character. Further contributing to the delineation of this picture is Vitória's perspective. From her thoughts the reader learns two important facts: that Fabiano holds her in such esteem that she wields a certain amount of power over him; and that Fabiano often begins projects which he does not complete, a tendency which annoys her because of its specific application to her hope of acquiring a real bed. This information alerts the reader to Fabiano's need for her guidance and prodding in order to follow through with his plans. Since Vitória shows less reluctance than her husband to participate in social activities, and since she demonstrates a fondness for the material trappings associated with societal life, the reader is assured that she will favorably regard Fabiano's growing awareness of the need to better their situation. Her encouragement will be crucial if he is to act on his ideas.

Multiple perspectives also reveal to the reader an important aspect of Fabiano's character which is unknown to him. Throughout the novel Fabiano's mental progression centers on the problem of dealing with the unfair use of power by those in authority. However, he does not realize that he himself, along with Vitória, are perceived as unjust authority figures by the children and Baleia. This constitutes the major irony of the text. Fabiano is victimized by those more powerful than himself, and he in turn victimizes those less powerful than he—his children and his dog. The beating

with the knife blade that Fabiano suffers in jail parallels the slap with the knife scabbard he inflicts on his older son in the opening chapter. Moreover, both Fabiano and Vitória kick Baleia with little or no provocation and hit the children when they mistakenly believe their behavior to be disrespectful, much like the reaction of the *soldado amarelo* toward Fabiano's protests. Seen from the conceptual viewpoint of the children and the dog, Fabiano and Vitória are powerful representatives of authority whose actions are capricious and whose motivations are mysterious. Consequently, emotions identical to those of Fabiano are experienced by his sons—anger and mistrust of authority coupled with feelings of personal impotence in the face of such power. Baleia's conceptual perspective is crucial to the reader's understanding of the consequences inherent in passive resignation to victimization. Seen from the dog's point of view, her death graphically demonstrates the ultimate extension of unquestioned obedience and loyalty to authority which, in turn, behaves with incomprehensible cruelty. Baleia is unable to turn against her master even as he is killing her. Indeed, she identifies the gun, rather than Fabiano, as the danger that threatens her. Throughout the ordeal she remains preoccupied with her household duties and responsibilities. In her last moments she envisions herself submissively licking the hand of her persecutor, now grown to the larger-than-life stature of generalized authority. Perceptual and conceptual perspectives unite to demonstrate the degree to which authority controls her. Unlike Fabiano, she never is able to free herself from its total domination. Subservient and frightened, she dies without understanding the reason for Fabiano's behavior.

Though the reader is privy to Fabiano's thoughts, the other protagonists are not, and their inarticulate nature impedes communication not only between the family and the outside world, but also among the members of the family itself. The text's sustained inside views engage the reader in an intimate relationship with the individual protagonists, and their lack of verbal skills does not hinder reader comprehension due to the free indirect style technique employed to communicate their viewpoints. However, this privileged relationship does not exist between the characters themselves. They remain separate and isolated as they view the world from their limited perspectives. The sons and Baleia are no more aware of the parents' motivations than Fabiano is aware of those of the *soldado amarelo*. The final chapter, however, suggests an eventual change in this situation. Here the first tentative steps at communication are finally established between Fabiano and Vitória. Moreover, the educational opportunities of the city will enable the sons to actively participate in future family conversations. Language put to the purpose of sharing ideas, conveying feelings, and clarifying situations will help counter future abuses of authority whether they exist within or outside of the family. Vitória's role as a communication initiator and socializing force opens the possibility for Fabiano to share the ideas he has been engendering throughout the novel;

and her encouragement, support, and insistence will motivate him to act on them.

As can be seen in the above discussion, narrative voice is the vehicle for conveying the perceptual and conceptual perspectives of the five protagonists; and the skillful handling of the various narrative voice features contributes greatly to the development of character in *Vidas Sêcas*. Among these, free indirect style is particularly appropriate in a work such as this which stresses the interior world of thoughts over plot action. Furthermore, emotional distance is controlled here through the management of these interior views. Finally, additional insights into each character are supplied through the interplay of the various perspectives provided.

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