# The True Glamour of Clarice Lispector

By Benjamin Moser
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The connection between literature and witchcraft has long been an important part of the Clarice mythology, which endures even now, nearly forty years after her death.PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY PAULO GURGEL VALENTE

Catholic communicants are asked at Easter, "Do you renounce the glamour of evil, and refuse to be mastered by sin?" The question preserves a conflation, now rare, of glamour and sorcery: glamour was a quality that confounds, shifts shapes, invests a thing with a mysterious aura; it was, as Sir Walter Scott wrote, "the magic power of imposing on the eyesight of spectators, so that the appearance of an object shall be totally different from the reality."

The legendarily beautiful Clarice Lispector, tall and blonde, clad in the outspoken sunglasses and chunky jewelry of a *grande dame* of midcentury Rio de Janeiro, met our current definition of glamour. She spent years as a fashion journalist and knew how to look the part. But it is as much in the older sense of the word that Clarice Lispector is glamorous: as a caster of spells, literally enchanting, her nervous ghost haunting every branch of the Brazilian arts.

Her spell has grown unceasingly since her death. Then, in 1977, it would have seemed exaggerated to say she was her country's preëminent modern writer. Today, when it no longer does, questions of artistic importance are, to a certain extent, irrelevant. What matters is the magnetic love she inspires in those susceptible to her. For them, reading Clarice Lispector is one of the great emotional experiences of their lives. But her glamour is dangerous. "Be careful

with Clarice," a friend told a reader decades ago, using the single name by which she is universally known. "It's not literature. It's witchcraft."

The connection between literature and witchcraft has long been an important part of the Clarice mythology. That mythology, with a powerful boost from the Internet, which magically transforms rumors into facts, has developed ramifications so baroque that it might today be called a minor branch of Brazilian literature. Circulating unstoppably online is an entire shadow oeuvre, generally trying, and failing, to sound profound, and breathing of passion. Online, too, Clarice has acquired a posthumous shadow body, as pictures of actresses portraying her are constantly reproduced in lieu of the original.

If the technology has changed its forms, the mythologizing itself is nothing new. Clarice Lispector became famous when, at the end of 1943, she published "Near to the Wild Heart." She was a student, barely twenty-three, from a poor immigrant background. Her first novel had such a tremendous impact that, one journalist wrote, "we have no memory of a more sensational debut, which lifted to such prominence a name that, until shortly before, had been completely unknown." But only a few weeks after that name was becoming known she left Rio with her husband, a diplomat. They would live abroad for almost two decades.

Though she made regular visits home, she would not return definitively until 1959. In that interval, legends flourished. Her odd foreign name became a subject of speculation—one critic suggested it might be a pseudonym—and others wondered whether she was, in fact, a man. Taken together, the legends reflect an uneasiness, a feeling that she was something other than she seemed.

In the eighty-five stories that she wrote, Clarice Lispector conjures, first of all, the writer herself. From her earliest story, published when she was nineteen, to the last, found in scratchy fragments after her death, we follow a lifetime of artistic experimentation through a vast range of styles and experiences. This literature is not for everyone: even certain highly literate Brazilians have been baffled by the cult-like fervor she inspires. But for those who instinctively understand her, the love for the person of Clarice Lispector is immediate and inexplicable. Hers is an art that makes us want to know the woman; she is a woman who makes us want to know her art. Through her stories we can trace her artistic life, from adolescent promise through assured maturity to the implosion as she nears—and summons—death.

But something more surprising appears when these stories are at last seen in their entirety, an accomplishment whose significance the author herself cannot have been aware of, for it could only appear retrospectively. This accomplishment lies in the second woman she conjures. Clarice Lispector was a great artist; she was also a middle-class wife and mother. If the portrait of the extraordinary artist is fascinating, so is the portrait of the ordinary housewife, whose life is the subject of her stories. As the artist matures, the housewife, too, grows older. When Lispector is a defiant adolescent filled with a sense of her own potential—artistic, intellectual, sexual—so are the girls in her stories. When, in her own life, marriage and motherhood take the place of precocious childhood, her characters grow up, too. When her marriage fails, when her children leave, these departures appear in her stories. When the author, once so gloriously beautiful, sees her body blemished by wrinkles and fat, her characters see the same decline in theirs; and when she confronts the final unravelling of age and sickness and death, they appear in her fiction as well.

This is a record of woman's entire life, written over the course of a woman's entire life. As such, it seems to be the first such total record written in fiction, in any language. This sweeping

claim requires qualifications. A wife and a mother; a bourgeois, Western, heterosexual woman's life. A woman who was not interrupted: a woman who did not start writing late, or stop for marriage or children, or succumb to drugs or suicide. A woman who, like so many male writers, began in her teens and carried on to the end. A woman who, in demographic respects, was exactly like most of her readers.

Their story had only been written in part. Before Clarice, a woman who wrote throughout her life *about* that life was so rare as to be previously unheard of. The claim seems extravagant, but I have not identified any predecessors.

The qualifications are important, but even when they are dropped it is astonishing to realize how few women were able to create such full bodies of work. And the women who did were precisely those exempted from the obstacles that kept most women from writing. These are the barriers Tillie Olsen adumbrated in her famous 1962 essay, "Silences in Literature," the barriers that led to women constituting, in Olsen's calculation, "one out of twelve" writers in the twentieth century. "In our century as in the last," Olsen wrote, "almost all distinguished achievement has come from childless women." Edith Wharton was far from middle-class; Colette hardly lived, or wrote about, a conventional bourgeois life. Others—Gabriela Mistral, Gertrude Stein—had, like many male writers, wives of their own.

Clarice Lispector, as her stories make clear, was intimately acquainted with these barriers. Her characters struggle against ideological notions about a woman's proper role; face practical entanglements with husbands and children; worry about money; confront the private despair that leads to drinking, madness, or suicide. Like so many women writers everywhere, she was ignored by publishers, agonizingly, for years; she was consistently placed in a separate (lower) category by reviewers and scholars. (She persisted anyway, once remarking that she did not enjoy being compared to Virginia Woolf because Woolf *had* given up: "The terrible duty is to go to the end.")

But her sympathy for silent and silenced women haunts these stories. The earliest ones, written when Clarice was in her teens and early twenties, often feature a restless girl in conflict with a man, as in "Jimmy and I":

Mama, before she got married, according to Aunt Emília, was a firecracker, a tempestuous redhead, with thoughts of her own about liberty and equality for women. But then along came Papa, very serious and tall, with thoughts of his own too, about … liberty and equality for women. The trouble was in the coinciding subject matter.

If these women are sometimes crushed by imposing, fascinating men, they become more assertive as the author grows older. But it is a different kind of assertion. The strident feminism of Clarice's student years gives way to something less explicit, the characters stop flaunting thoughts about "liberty and equality for women." They simply live their lives with as much dignity as they can muster. In art as in life, that is not always very much.

Many are silent. The grandmother in "Happy Birthday" surveys the petty mediocrities she has spawned with wordless revulsion. The Congolese pygmy in "The Smallest Woman in the World" has no words to express her love. The hen in "A Chicken" has no words to say that she is about to give birth—and thus cannot be killed. In "The Burned Sinner and the Harmonious Angels," an adulteress utters not a single word, and in the end she is burned as a witch. At the execution, her husband admonishes the crowd, "Beware a woman who dreams."

Clarice was nine when Virginia Woolf asked a question she later quoted: “Who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet’s heart when caught and tangled in a woman’s body?” The question, Woolf believed, applied as much to women of her own day as it did to women of Shakespeare’s. How did *Clarice Lispector*—of all people—succeed at a time when so many other women were silenced?

She was born on December 10, 1920, to a Jewish family in western Ukraine. It was a time of chaos, famine, and racial war. Her grandfather was murdered; her mother was raped; her father was exiled, penniless, to the other side of the world. The family’s tattered remnants washed up in northeastern Brazil, in 1922. There, her brilliant father, reduced to peddling rags, barely managed to keep his family fed; there, when Clarice was not quite nine, her mother died of her wartime injuries.

Her sister Elisa wrote that their liberal father, whose own desire to study had been thwarted by anti-Semitism, “was determined for the world to see what kind of daughters he had.” With his encouragement, Clarice pursued her education far beyond the level allowed even girls far more economically advantaged. Only a couple of years after reaching the capital, Clarice entered one of the redoubts of the élite, the National Law Faculty of the University of Brazil. At the law school, Jews (zero) were even more rare than women (three).

Her law studies left little mark. She was already pursuing her vocation into the newsrooms of the capital, where her beauty and brilliance made a dazzling impression. She was, her boss wrote, “a smart girl, an excellent reporter, and, in contrast to almost all women, actually knows how to write.” On May 25, 1940, she published her earliest known story, “The Triumph.” Three months later, at age fifty-five, her father died. Before her twentieth birthday, Clarice was an orphan. In 1943, she married a Catholic man—unheard of at the time for a Jewish girl in Brazil. At the end of that year, shortly after she published her first novel, the couple left Rio. In short order, she had left not only her family, her ethnic community, and her country, but also her profession, journalism, in which she had a burgeoning reputation.

She found exile intolerable, and during her fifteen years abroad her tendency toward depression grew sharper. But, despite its disadvantages, perhaps exile—this series of exiles—explains how she managed to write. Her immigrant background left her less susceptible to the received ideas of Brazilian society. And in purely financial terms her marriage was a step up. She was never rich, but as long as she was married she did not have to work on anything but writing. She had two children, but she also had full-time help. This meant free hours every day: a room of her own.

Traditionally “female” subjects—marriage and motherhood, kids and clothes—had, of course, been written about before. But had any writer ever described a seventy-seven-year-old lady dreaming of coitus with a pop star, or an eighty-one-year-old woman masturbating? Half a century or more after they were written, many of Clarice’s stories, read in an entirely different age, have lost none of their novelty.

New subjects require new language. Part of Clarice’s odd grammar can be traced to the powerful influence of the Jewish mysticism that her father introduced her to. But another part of its strangeness can be attributed to her need to invent a tradition. As anyone who reads her stories from beginning to end will see, they are shot through by a ceaseless linguistic searching, a grammatical instability, that prevents them from being read too quickly.

The reader—not to mention the translator—is often tripped up by their nearly Cubist patterns. In certain late stories, the difficulties are obvious. But many of Clarice's reorderings are subtle, easy to miss. In "Love," for example, we read: "They were growing up, taking their baths, demanding for themselves, misbehaved, ever more complete moments." The sentence, like so many of Clarice's, makes sense if read in a quick glance—and then, examined again, slowly, begins to dissolve. In "Happy Birthday," amidst an awkward celebration, a child verbalizes an awkward pause: "Their mother, comma!"

In "Why This World," my biography of Clarice, I examined her roots in Jewish mysticism and the essentially spiritual impulse that animated her work. As the Kabbalists found divinity by rearranging letters, repeating nonsensical words, parsing verses, and seeking a logic other than the rational, so did she. With some exceptions, this mystic quality, which can make her prose nearly abstract, is less visible in her stories than in novels such as "The Passion According to G.H." or "The Apple in the Dark." But to see Clarice's writing as a whole is to understand the close connection between her interest in language and her interest in what—for lack of a better word—she called God.

In her stories, the divine erupts beneath carefully tended everyday lives. "She had pacified life so well," she writes in one story, "taken such care for it not to explode." When the inevitable explosions come, shifts in grammar announce them long before they appear in the plot. Laura, the bored, childless housewife in "The Imitation of the Rose," has a "painstaking taste for method"—until, as she is thinking about how to explain herself to her friend Carlota, her grammar starts to slide.

Carlota would be stunned to learn that they too had a private life and things they never told, but she wouldn't tell, what a shame not to be able to tell, Carlota definitely thought she was just tidy and mundane and a little annoying, and if she had to be careful not to burden other people with details, with Armando she'd sometimes relax and get pretty annoying, which didn't matter because he'd pretend to be listening without really listening to everything she was telling him, which didn't ever bother her, she understood perfectly well that her chattering tired people out a bit, but it was nice to be able to explain how she hadn't found any meat even if Armando shook his head and wasn't listening, she and the maid chatted a lot, actually she talked more than the maid, and she was also careful not to pester the maid who sometimes held back her impatience and could get a little rude, it was her own fault because she didn't always command respect.

These signals can be much more concise, as in "The Passion According to G.H.," when another housewife recounts the mystical shock she underwent the day before. Remembering herself as she then was, G.H. says, "I finally got up from the breakfast table, that woman." The transformation described in the novel—then to now, yesterday to today, her to me, first person to third—is resumed in a breezy anacoluthon, the break in grammar perfectly symbolizing the break in this woman's life. Like so many of Clarice's best phrases, it is elegant precisely because it disregards the mannered conventions that are the elegance of *belles lettres*.

"In painting as in music and literature," she wrote, "what is called abstract so often seems to me the figurative of a more delicate and difficult reality, less visible to the naked eye." As abstract painters sought to portray mental and emotional states without direct representation, and modern composers expanded traditional laws of harmony, Clarice undid reflexive patterns in grammar. She often had to remind readers that her "foreign" speech was not the result of her European birth or an ignorance of Portuguese.

Nor, needless to say, of the proper ways women presented themselves. As a professional fashion writer, she reveled in her characters' appearances. And then she dishevelled their dresses, smudged their mascara, deranged their hair, enchanting well-composed faces with the creepier glamour Sir Walter Scott described. With overturned words, she conjured an entire unknown world—conjuring, too, the unforgettable Clarice Lispector: a female Chekhov on the beaches of Guanabara.

*This essay is adapted from the introduction to "The Complete Stories," by Clarice Lispector, out in August from New Directions. Benjamin Moser is the series editor of New Directions' Lispector translations.*