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Humor as a strategy for coping with death in the short story "o último dia na vida do ferreiro"

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ABSTRACT: This article aims to analyze how the short story “O Último Dia na Vida do Ferreiro”, by Ricardo Azevedo, uses humor as a narrative device to represent the process of death and dying. From the perspective of thanatology and the cultural history of humor, the study investigates how the narrative reconfigures the figure of Death, attributing to it comic and human traits. The adopted methodology is qualitative and documentary in nature, based on the contributions of authors such as Driessen (2000), Alberti (2002), Duarte (2006), and Kübler-Ross (1996). In conclusion, the story is shown to enable a pedagogical and philosophical reflection on finitude, demystifying death and promoting a form of laughter that remedies the irremediable. Moreover, it contributes to the understanding that death is a phenomenon inherent to the human experience. By employing humorous strategies, the narrative offers an opportunity to discuss a difficult and complex subject, promoting an educational approach to the theme through ludicity.

Keywords: folk tales; brazilian literature; ricardo azevedo; thanatology; thanatopedagogy.

O humor como estratégia de enfrentamento da morte no conto "o último dia na vida do ferreiro"

RESUMO: Este artigo tem como objetivo analisar de que forma o conto "O Último Dia na Vida do Ferreiro", de Ricardo Azevedo, utiliza o humor como dispositivo narrativo para representar o processo de morte e morrer. A partir da perspectiva da tanatologia e da história cultural do humor, investiga-se como a narrativa reconfigura a figura da Morte, atribuindo-lhe traços cômicos e humanos. A metodologia adotada é de cunho qualitativo e documental, com base nas contribuições de autores como Driessen (2000), Alberti (2002), Duarte (2006) e Kübler-Ross (1996). Ao final, demonstra-se que o conto permite uma reflexão pedagógica e filosófica sobre a finitude, desmistificando a morte e promovendo um riso que remedia o irremediável, além de contribuir para o entendimento de que a morte é um fenômeno que faz parte do contexto da vida. Ao fazer uso de recursos humorísticos, a estratégia narrativa oportuniza a discussão de um tema difícil e complexo, promovendo um princípio educativo sobre o assunto a partir da ludicidade.

Palavras-chaves: contos populares; literatura brasileira; ricardo azevedo; tanatologia; tanatopedagogia.

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Introduction

Ricardo Azevedo is one of the most renowned authors of contemporary Brazilian children's and young adult literature. With training in Social Sciences and a strong influence from oral tradition and popular culture, his works stand out for the use of accessible language, humor and social critique. Contos de Enganar a Morte (2014), the work from which the analyzed tale was taken, gathers narratives of oral tradition, retold with traces of irony and playfulness, and aims to reflect on death through situations that break with the tragic and rescue the popular imagination.

In this book, Ricardo Azevedo resorts to humor as a narrative strategy to address human finitude, challenging the taboos that surround the theme. The work, which received an honorable mention in the Children's or Young Adult category of the Jabuti Prize in 2004, presents a series of popular tales and folkloric narratives that reflect on death. In this article, we propose the analysis of the tale "The Last Day in the Blacksmith's Life," focusing on the use of humor as a way of constructing meanings about the process of dying and death. The text used for analysis is from the 14th reprint of the work, published in 2014 by Ática Publishing.

Our analysis starts from the understanding that laughter and humor are cultural constructions, according to Driessen (2000), and that, therefore, they can be mobilized as discursive strategies to deal with limit situations. As Duarte (2006) proposes, humor enables the break with rational logic and offers a form of symbolic resistance in the face of finitude. By linking humor to thanatology, Azevedo's narrative acts as a fertile field for the development of thanatopedagogy, since laughter, as a defense mechanism, allows the child (and the reader in general) to cognitively and emotionally elaborate the notion of finitude. In this case, comicity does not annul the seriousness of death, but creates a path of symbolization that softens the impact of the theme and makes it accessible in the school and family environment.

In the same perspective, Lima et al. (2011, p. 1614) indicate that humor "[…] can contribute to transforming the attitude in the face of anguish and despair arising from past mistakes and the confrontation with one's own finitude." In this sense, we trace two questions that guided our investigation: in what way was the recourse to humor constructed in this tale by Ricardo Azevedo as a way to deal with the feeling that the loss of loved ones causes? How can the principles of thanatology, as proposed by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1996), be applied to the understanding of this process in the literary text?

To answer these questions, we used a qualitative approach, with documentary and bibliographic analysis. We understand the literary text as a document, in light of Martino (2018, p. 75), for whom "[…] literary art expresses society, that is, it reflects the state of things." The research corpus was constituted by the aforementioned tale, which was analyzed based on the theoretical contributions of thanatology and the cultural history of humor, especially in the studies of Kübler-Ross (1996), Duarte (2006), Alberti (2002) and Driessen (2000).

Regarding thanatological aspects, we were interested in understanding how the theory of the five stages of the process of death and dying (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) could emerge in the narrative. Duarte (2006) and Alberti (2002) provide conceptual elements about the laughable as a form of fabulation that allows escape from the logic of the tragic, whether through word, action or plot. Thus, we sought to understand how Azevedo uses the laughable as a narrative strategy to introduce the discussion of a complex theme such as human finitude, promoting a thanatopedagogical principle. Driessen (2000), in turn, helps us conceive laughter as a social and communicational phenomenon, capable of producing cohesion and reducing fear in the face of finitude.

The choice of the tale "The Last Day in the Blacksmith's Life" was made due to its representativeness within Contos de Enganar a Morte, for articulating elements of popular culture and children's literature with profound existential themes. The main selection criterion was the explicit presence of the figure of Death as a character and the use of humorous resources to thematize the process of dying. The analysis of the tale was carried out using a qualitative, interpretative approach, centered on thematic and symbolic analysis of the text, considering contributions from thanatology, grief psychology and literary theory. The study also considered the educational function of the text, in dialogue with the proposal of thanatopedagogy..

DEATH AS A COMIC FIGURE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF HUMOR IN "THE LAST DAY IN THE BLACKSMITH'S LIFE"

The tale under analysis begins with the presentation of Death as a crafty character who tricks a young man by offering him possession of land. However, after fulfilling his part of the agreement made with Death, the young man became exhausted, stumbled on a stone and slid down a ravine, dying as a result of the fall. The use of irony becomes evident in the text when, after noting the youth's passing, Death says: "There! This is all the land you needed to live on!" (Azevedo, 2014, p. 20).

With the intention of using the same trick, Death continues on her way, visiting a young blacksmith. However, the latter is not deceived by the promise of easy reward and, irritated, expels Death. She then leaves dissatisfied, but states that one day she will return and take him with her. The man does not care and continues living his life, which was full of vicissitudes and difficulties. It is at a moment of even greater hardship, however, that his fate changes.

Once, the blacksmith meets an old woman on her way home, who begs for food. Supposing that he and his wife could survive one day without eating, the man gives her everything he had: "[…] a piece of old bread and a little meat" (Azevedo, 2014, p. 22). After his three days' hunger was finally satisfied, the woman reveals she had supernatural powers and shows her gratitude by granting three wishes to the blacksmith:

> The blacksmith thought a lot.
>
> Then he asked for three things. Iron and coal so he could work in peace for the rest of his life; a magic table that always had food on it; and a viola that, when played, made people go out dancing without being able to stop (Azevedo, 2018, p. 22).

From this unusual encounter, his life improved significantly and time passed quickly, until the blacksmith became an old man. One day, Death visited him again, as promised. However, this time, it is he who tricks her and asks to play the viola as a last wish. When the enchanted melody begins, Death's body starts to dance uncontrollably. The blacksmith used this to bargain with her and played all night to convince her to give him one more year of life.

At this point in the plot, a pantomimic resource is used since Azevedo describes Death "toddling sweaty" (Azevedo, 2014, p. 23) from so much dancing and begging the blacksmith to stop playing. This type of resource provokes laughter by breaking the traditional image associated with finitude, which becomes a personified figure in Azevedo's tale. For Ferreira and Bulhões (2017), the blacksmith who stars in Azevedo's tale belongs to a specific category of heroes who devise wild plans to trick Death, with relative initial success, but which are not a definitive guarantee that she will not come to claim her due. The authors say these heroes "[…] enchant the reader as adventures and relieve the fear of finitude through laughter" (Ferreira; Bulhões, 2017, p. 91).

Another important point to highlight from the idea of Death being deceived and set to dance concerns the fact that, by using this resource, Azevedo invests in the idea of an ontological metaphor, according to Lakoff and Johnson's premise (2002). In this context, entities of an abstract nature or complex experiences come to be understood as objects or beings with concrete existence.

When Death is named, that is, described with a proper noun represented by capitalization, she acquires an essence differentiated from her traditional symbolic representation. The Death of Azevedo's tale dances, appears sweaty, begs, gains a corporeal dimension, emotions and even some vulnerability, since she is deceived multiple times.

This personification not only intensifies the humor of the narrative but also transforms the abstraction of finitude into a tangible figure, capable of being tricked. Thus, the ontological metaphor acts as a cognitive and literary resource that allows the reader to access the concept of death through a concrete and humanized schema, breaking with rigid models of representation and opening space for satire and laughter.

The tale continues showing that, after tricking Death, during his last year the man was able to enjoy moments beside people he loved and acquire new experiences around the world. In a way, two elements observed by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1996) in her research with terminal patients appear at this point in the

tale: bargaining and acceptance.

Kübler-Ross (1996) indicates that, faced with the five stages of the dying process, it is common for the subject to manifest the desire to negotiate with the supernatural or with the metaphysical universe in an attempt to obtain more time of life. Frequently, this process involves promises or commitments with some specific type of treatment, provided something considered essential for the person is achieved.

In Ricardo Azevedo's tale, the blacksmith bargains for one more year of life with Death, a period in which he seeks to reconcile with friends and family, as well as visit places he always wanted to see. This narrative alludes to the acceptance phase (Kübler-Ross, 1996), a moment in which the subject recognizes the inevitability of his finitude and, with greater serenity, begins to deal with death in a less conflictual way. The literary representation of this stage of existential grief reinforces fiction's capacity to translate, through symbolic language, deep subjective processes linked to dying.

Inevitably, Death returned to fetch him, but by mere coincidence he was not at home at that moment and his departure was postponed again. When she returned days later, the blacksmith's wife lied saying he was not at home and, enraged, Death warned that there would be no escape next week.

As a last resort, the blacksmith and his wife decide to try to deceive Death with a disguise, and he pretends to be his wife's uncle. However, as soon as Death arrives at the house and the wife claims there was no one besides the visitor, she clarifies that her work can no longer be postponed and takes the supposed uncle. The tale ends with the blacksmith's death, evidencing the inevitability of the process of death and dying.

It is interesting to observe the transformations that the figure of Death goes through during the tale. Initially, she is presented as an ethereal being aware of human fragilities, which she uses to persuade the first young man in the story, who is reaped during her visit. In these initial passages, Death's representation is marked by an ironic tone that manifests mainly in her way of speaking:

> – What is this, boy! What nonsense! – she replied, in a smooth voice. – It's nothing like that. Put down that hoe! I came here to give you a prize!
>
> – Prize? – the other asked, suspiciously.
>
> Death spoke softly. She announced that that was a lucky day for the young man. That he should leave work and run through the fields; all the land he managed to cover would be his (Azevedo, 2014, p. 19).

According to Pincelli and Américo (2019), sarcasm, a technique of irony, necessarily involves a subject who is ridiculed by the agent and expresses an idea contrary to the addressee's conduct. In this sense, Death's sarcastic speech denotes her superiority over the young man, seen as a foolish, naive being and, thus, incapable of deceiving her. Therefore, he strives to run as much as possible in order to win the prize she promised, but this decision ends in his death. One perceives, then, the use of situational irony, in which the outcome of an action is the opposite of what was expected.

From this perspective, the chosen humorous resources — irony and sarcasm — can be associated with the Superiority Theory and the Incongruity Theory, since the former defends that humor arises from the weaknesses of the other, while the latter states that laughter is provoked by the breach of expectation, as in situational irony (Pincelli; Américo, 2019). Such issues are noticeable in Death's speech after fulfilling her objective, as it encompasses both the impossibility of contradicting her and the contrast between what the young man imagined and his final fate.

Next, the blacksmith is introduced into the story as the next target of Death. The protagonist's description suggests that, being a person in a socioeconomically vulnerable situation, he could be attracted by the same promise of easy riches. However, the proposal is not accepted by him, who quickly perceives Death's bad intention, and his reaction runs counter to the socially constructed and expected fear regarding death. Thus, the absurd is used as a tool to break expectation and, immediately, provoke laughter in the reader.[3]

[3] O jovem pegou um pedaço de ferro em brasa e atirou na cara da Morte.
– Cai fora, desgraçada! Vai embora daqui! Me deixa trabalhar e viver minha vida em paz! (Azevedo, 2014, p. 20).

Some time later, the blacksmith obtains the right to three magical wishes as a reward for his help given to an old woman found at the roadside. From then on, he ceases to suffer from everyday adversities and has the chance to enjoy life and, gradually, grow old. Eventually, he receives a visit from Death. It is observed that the informal way in which the character is described also points to the absurd, since, in general, she is seen as a frightening and serious entity, and not in a relaxed manner as indicated by the text: "One day, they knocked on his door. It was Death. 'Do you remember me?' she asked, grinning. 'This time there is no way out. I came to fetch you.'" (Azevedo, 2014, p. 23).

Despite his wife's despair, the blacksmith identifies the opportunity to negotiate with Death, using one of his granted wishes as a strategy. By recognizing the character's predictable behavior, convinced of her superiority, he pretends to confide his last request: to play the viola. Death, unaware of the magical power of the musical instrument, accepts.

In this context, a change of perspective in the tale is perceived, in which Death becomes an object of ridicule. According to Alberti (2002), a subject ceases to provoke laughter if it becomes repetitive or expected, which is why it must be renewed. Therefore, in the subsequent scenes, a new resource is employed to elicit laughter: pantomime, characterized by the manifestation of feelings or ideas through gestures. It is present in the words chosen to narrate Death's uncontrollable bodily movements upon hearing the melody, creating a humorous effect:

> Upon hearing that magical music, Death shuddered and went through the room jumping, dancing and tapping her feet.
> "Stop that!" she cried, frightened.
> "I won't stop a thing!" replied the man laughing and playing.
> And his fingers flew, making the viola's strings vibrate.
> Death, meanwhile, writhed, swayed and gyrated uncontrollably, unable to stop. (Azevedo, 2014, p. 23)..

Moreover, this passage indicates that humor can be used as a mechanism to ease the anguish related to finitude. According to Pincelli and Américo (2019, p. 185), laughter requires, at minimum, "the interlocution of two or more people whether real or imaginary: the one who provokes laughter, the one who is laughed at and also the person or people with whom one laughs." In the tale's case, laughter was used by the protagonist to try to prolong his life and, in a way, deal with his own finitude:

> "I will only stop if you give me three more years of life. I have many things I still want to do."
> "That's too much," replied Death, toddling sweaty and awkward across the room. "You're too old." […]
> "Either you give me two years or I'll stay here playing for the rest of my life and you there dancing and capering."
> After much insistence over long hours of negotiation, the blacksmith's bargaining is successful and he obtains one more year of life (AZEVEDO, 2014, pp. 23–25)..

The tale ends with the blacksmith's death, symbolizing Death's triumph. Following the logic of the popular saying "he who laughs last, laughs best," the story's twists present moments in which Death sometimes deceives and sometimes is deceived, but nonetheless always culminate in her victory. The fate of both men manifests the idea that death is a process inherent to human existence. In the blacksmith's case, finitude could be faced more calmly through humor.

Finally, it is also possible to observe that the tale is marked by the laughable of things, grounded in argument — that is, "everything that is said, everything that one pretends to say or even everything that is left to be guessed by recourse to irony […]" (PINCELLI and AMÉRICO, 2019, p. 69) — and in action or performance of discourse. This is illustrated by the choice of words and their manifestations by the characters, especially pantomime. Thus, the laughable of things tends to be considered funnier due to the ease with which it is assimilated by the reader and, therefore, reinforces the idea that humorous text can contribute to the discussion of the process of dying and death..

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The results of this analysis point to the potential of the tale as a pedagogical tool in the processes of education for death, especially with the child and adolescent public. The use of humor makes it possible to discuss death without trauma, encouraging reflections on the life cycle in an ethical, emotionally welcoming and culturally meaningful way. The narrative favors the symbolic elaboration of loss and can be applied in formal educational contexts (such as schools) and informal ones (in reading circles or therapeutic groups), being a relevant contribution to the field of thanatopedagogy.

Ricardo Azevedo's tale builds a personified figure of Death that presents human traits, relaxed speech and reveals therein the central strategy of humor in the analyzed text. The character not only speaks and negotiates, but also dances, complains and despairs in attitudes that are frankly humanized.

The use of humor reveals itself as a strategy of a thanatopedagogical nature, which makes it possible to treat the theme of human finitude with lightness, allowing reflection on it without fear. Humor thus fulfills an educational function with regard to dealing with issues about the process of dying and death, contributing to the understanding that such a process is part of life.

Thus, Azevedo (2014) offers a pedagogy of death that dialogues with popular culture. Reading his tale does not trivialize human finitude, but inserts it into the sphere of language and shared experience. The blacksmith's journey through existence, his attempts to trick Death and the bargaining are attitudes that essentially speak to our humanity; therefore, the process of identification with the character facilitates the reader's assimilation of the text's message.

The tale uses humor as a symbolic resource to deal with the inevitable that refers to the end of life. It uses elements of playfulness to identify issues such as bargaining, acceptance and resistance to death. Amid the narrative, one notices the recourse to fabulation as a way to escape the logic of the tragic, creating gaps for the reinvention of existence.

Therefore, the text is configured as an example of how literature can articulate humor and thanatology, promoting reflection, empathy and learning about one of the most complex subjects of human existence. In this sense, the tale at hand acquires thanatopedagogical potential by provoking reflections on the end of life in a sensitive, critical and accessible manner, promoting the symbolic elaboration of death and contributing to the ethical and emotional formation of the reader — central aspects of thanatopedagogy.

We emphasize that this study is limited to the analysis of a single tale, not encompassing the full complexity of Ricardo Azevedo's work or other narratives that also dialogue with the theme of death and the use of humor. In addition, no empirical analyses were carried out on the tale's reception by children or educators. Future research can broaden the scope of this work by investigating the reception of these narratives in educational environments, as well as exploring comparisons between different authors and cultures that address finitude with HUMOR.

By proposing the integration between literature, thanatology, education and childhood, this article seeks to collaborate with the construction of more sensitive and symbolic approaches for teaching about death. The analyzed tale proves effective in bringing the reader closer to the theme of finitude in a playful, critical and affective way. It is therefore proposed that works such as Azevedo's be incorporated into interdisciplinary pedagogical practices, contributing to the emotional, literary and ethical formation of children and young people..

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