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**The Road To Destruction: Solitude And Decadence In Crônica Da Casa Assassinada**

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THE ROAD TO DESTRUCTION: SOLITUDE AND DECADENCE  
in  
Crônica da Casa Assassinada  
by  
Lúcio Cardoso

A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of the Department of Languages  
of the  
University of New Mexico

In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

by  
Sharon Wyatt  
June, 1964

This thesis, directed and approved by the candidate's committee, has been accepted by the Graduate Committee of the University of New Mexico in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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## INTRODUCTION

Lúcio Cardoso's work may be considered as personifying the problem of human solitude in all its physical, moral, and spiritual aspects. Mankind is a wretched lot forever condemned to an oppressive solitude by a merciless God. He developed this theme first through the omniscient third person as in A Luz no Sub-solo and Dias Perdidos, then turned to the stream of consciousness technique as recorded in the mind as in O Anfiteatro, or in a confession as in Inácio, and finally perfected it in his masterpiece, Crônica da Casa Assassinada. I have chosen to analyze this last book since it is the most complex of his novels. An analysis of it is an implicit one of the content of his whole body of work.

In the Crônica can be found not only the same theme which underlies all his work but also a more complex interweaving of various narrations which encompasses it. Thus, outsiders such as Father Justino, the doctor, and the pharmacist give their opinions and present the third person view which, however, in this case, is obviously limited. They also represent the view of the city as against that of the "fazenda" given by the Meneses family. Valdo merely remembers these events, while Nina writes letters about them, Betty and André keep diaries, and Ana resorts to confessions in order to ease her mind.

Each of these speakers presents his version of the truth. Each, of necessity, sees but one facet of it, but this partial insight becomes the whole truth as far as he is concerned. Their testimonies reveal the isolation of the members of the Meneses family from the rest of the world, and their subsequent self-seclusion from not only strangers, but also each other as is best symbolized by the total withdrawal of Timóteo from relations with his family. The function of Timóteo is, in fact, to act as a reflection wherein is mirrored the hidden depravity of the other members of his family.

In the struggle within the Meneses over the preservation or destruction of their tradition and position, each person reveals his tragedy to be that of an inability to communicate with each other, and consequently their failure to understand one another. Such beings can never reveal themselves completely. To do so would be to destroy them because their silence and their negative forces are an intimate part of their beings which a sense of acute modesty, or shyness, defends from the curiosity of others.

The theme of human loneliness is often treated in an existentialist manner without adequate motivation for its being. As a result of mere discussion and nothing more, solitude remains a feeling about life held by the author without substantiation, and at times seems extravagant as in Inácio and O Enfeitado. Lúcio Cardoso in the Crônica has surmounted this problem by linking his subjective study



of solitude to an objective survey of the physical, moral, and spiritual decadence of a once illustrious family. Such a mental and physical state gains force by the addition of adequate justification.<sup>1</sup>

Decadence in A Crônica da Casa Assassinada is connected with the end of the usefulness and gradual extinction of the glory of a whole way of life. As the remnants of an aristocratic, slave owning society disappear, the souls of the people whose lives were centered on it and who still obstinately cling to the past in defiant disregard of the realities of the modern age also decline in a slow but inevitable process. The meaningless sterility of such an empty life dedicated to the preservation of the past is shown by the isolation of these people. It resembles that of hurt, dying animals who try to hide from their enemies. In this case, the active, dynamic life of the industrialized cities which is subverting the old, rural, monoculture system of the "fazenda" has become the adversary. Unable to adapt to such a change, these people are destroying themselves and the last vestiges of their heritage. By their loss of spiritual and moral values, they emphasize the reality of the degeneration prefiguring the disappearance of the way of life.

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<sup>1</sup>It should be noted that this signifies a break with his past work. In his first stage, Cardoso was under the French influence of Julien Green and the moralist novelists, such as Gide and Schlumberger, of the beginning of this century who followed the tradition established by the Princesse de Clèves of Madame de Lafayette. He now has come under the influence of American authors such as William Faulkner, and bears a marked relationship to John Cheever.

In the following chapters, I will first consider the physical symbols of such decadence and isolation, then proceed to a study of the psychological behavior of the Meneses in this respect, and conclude with their moral and spiritual degeneracy.

## THE SYMBOLS OF ISOLATION, DECADENCE, AND EVIL

In Crônica da Casa Assassinada, places and things stand as symbols of the moral and spiritual decadence found in the family. Thus the material poverty of the town and estate reflect the more significant spiritual poverty of the Meneses. In the same way, the isolation of these places shows how this family has almost willingly exiled itself from contact with the rest of the world, reaching the extreme of Timóteo locking himself away from any communication with even the members of his own despised clan. From Timóteo to Nina, each person is in reality a prisoner to his own sins and hatreds. The extreme pallor of their complexions is that of creatures locked away from the sun and life. Everyone succumbs without struggle to this stagnant state of affairs except Nina. To the rest of the family she opens visions of life with passions and emotions, though these are to be corrupted into their worst representatives. Ironically, though Nina struggles to live life to the fullest and rebels against the dictates of Demétrio as the representative of the Meneses, it is yet she herself who epitomizes the moldy climate of the novel and is the definitive catalytic agent which afflicts the family and stirs each member into action and reaction.

Both this once proud family and the mansion are slowly crumbling under the weight of shame and degradation. Inexplicably, this family which should be the representative of the highest values of mankind has suffered a spiritual paralysis and has become prey to a continuous decadence. Their hatred and sins typifying their moral and spiritual decomposition are much like the action of a silent tumor which like Nina's cancer secretly spreads its poison and evil throughout the body of its victim, and only manifests its presence when it is too late to hope to reverse its destructiveness and save the patient. Such corrosion of the soul is a gradual, insidious process resembling the effects of certain poisons administered slowly to the victim which weaken and ultimately destroy him. All this is indicative of the impossibility of these people achieving a good, meaningful relationship among themselves. They are too much inhibited by their ever increasing spiritual limitations to experience anything but the evils of sin and hatred.

The representative symbols are, therefore, the town and estate on the one hand, and diseases, the image of poison, and the physical attributes of the embodiments of revolt, Maria Sinhá and Timóteo, on the other. It is, then, worthwhile to explore the use of these threads in the narrative to see how individually and as a whole they evoke the prevalent atmosphere of isolation, degeneration and evil.

## The Town

Vila Velha is an isolated, poverty-stricken little town located in the interior of Minas Gerais. Such a fact contains an implicit image conveyed by all "Mineiro" writers. Minas Gerais is a state isolated from the others by its encircling wall of mountains which causes its citizens to feel withdrawn onto themselves. The state's economy is also based to a major extent on mineral wealth. Such a hard, cold substance seemingly has penetrated the very soul of its inhabitants inflicting them with sadness and pride, setting them apart from others by the very fact of their birth there. Demétrio, for instance, is often spoken of as having an iron-like soul.

Vila Velha is the ultimate concentration of all these isolationist aspects. So far as its inhabitants are concerned, it might as well have been the end of the world because there seems to be no contact at all with the outside world. Even modern conveniences are present only in the most rudimentary forms. Electricity, for instance, is deficient and untrustworthy. The dirt roads which pass for highways are bad enough on normal days and converted to impassable mud when it begins to rain.

All the references made to the town are in a derogatory sense. The abilities of Maria Sinhá, the shadowy legend of the family, were stifled in these dusty depths of a southern province in Minas Gerais. As for Nina, she is repelled by the place from the beginning. Even the

townspeople sympathize with her, admitting she is like a queen who does not deserve exile to that land of dust and melancholy apathy. Nina is a person who must live life frantically and cannot bear the peaceful, sleepy life the town and its inhabitants endure. Except for the inevitable gossip which appears to center particularly on the Meneses, there are no amusements of any type--no balls, nor a theater, nor even parties, except for the occasional ones held by the Baron, from which the Meneses hold themselves aloof.

However, Nina does not only evince scorn for this isolation, she also feels a certain nostalgia for it which is in a sense incompatible with the other sentiment.<sup>1</sup> When she is in Minas Gerais, she detests

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<sup>1</sup>Other "Mineiro" writers have also expressed this ambiguous emotion of both scorn and "saúdaes" for the sleepy little villages which life seems to by-pass. For instance, Carlos Drummond de Andrade wrote the brief but expressive "Cidadezinha Qualquer" which reveals his dislike for this type of town.

Casas entre bananeiras  
mulheres entre laranjeiras  
pomar amor cantar.

Um homem vai devagar,  
Um cachorro vai devagar.  
Um burro vai devagar.  
Devagar . . . as janelas olham.

Éta vida bêsta, meu Deus.

Yet they, too, seemingly can never quite escape it. It is part of their heritage which was given them by their birth. Such writers oscillate between wanting to escape this closed, stifling form of life by going

the sad, avaricious people and land. She can never adapt herself to their life, and is always ready to leave. However, she always returns from Rio de Janeiro to the place where she has learned elegance and good taste in surroundings of peace and apparent wealth.

### The Chácara

Cardoso centers his work on the "Chácara" of the Meneses. As the old manor house of this aristocratic family, it reflected their glory and prestige during the days of their greatness. In like manner, it now reveals their inner deterioration and isolation. Even its location is significant. It stands near the narrow, winding, dirt road overshadowed and menaced by the luxurious tropical trees, full of bogs and pitfalls. It is so isolated even from the tiny town that it is considered almost a prize when finally reached by anyone who ventures so far along the lonely road.

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to a metropolitan center, and a yearning for it. Drummond de Andrade also expressed this.

from "Explicação"

Aquela casa de nove andares comerciais  
 é muito interessante.  
 A casa colonial da fazenda também era . . .  
 No elevador penso na roça,  
 na roça penso no elevador.

Carlos Drummond de Andrade, Fazendeiro do Ar e Poesia até Agora, José Olímpio Editora 1955, pp. 46; 73-74.

Since the Meneses are no longer wealthy, they are unable to keep up the expenses of such a large, and once magnificent mansion. They do their best since to abandon their home would amount to an act of self-discredit which would reflect on the family honor. In a sense, the house is more than just the symbolic representative of the family.

. . . talvez a herdade seja uma doença de sangue. Essas pedras argamassam tôda estrutura interior da família, são êles Meneses de cimento e cal, como outros se vangloriam da nobreza que lhes corre nas veias.<sup>1</sup>

Through neglect the house is slowly decaying. Valdo describes its deterioration fifteen years after Nina's departure: the endless action of time is more visible in the windows which can no longer be opened, in the wall paint which has darkened and chipped, in the walls which are streaked from the years of rain, and in the forest which has begun invading the garden, reclaiming its old dominion. Father Justino compares the appearance of the veranda to the old days when he used to visit the ailing matriarch of the family, D. Malvina. The columns are rotten and broken while the unrestrained vegetation is threatening an invasion of the house. The crumbling process is evident, devouring the old austere renown of the place like a cancer.

Even in its furnishings can be detected this note of disrepair and decadent old age. The oratory of Our Lady of Sorrows with its

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<sup>1</sup>Lúcio Cardoso, Crônica da Casa Assassinada, Rio de Janeiro, José Olímpio, 1959, p. 95.



dilapidated cloth coverings has become a storeroom for unwanted items, indicating the disinterest in matters of faith shown by the members of the family. In other minor details their former opulence may be seen, and thus but serves to emphasize the present decline. For important occasions they can resurrect porcelain embossed not only with gilded leaves, but also the monogram of the family, which had been imported from Europe. Another relic of their previous wealth is the old grand piano which no longer finds much use and whose strings are rusty and untuned. The mere presence of this instrument in the mansion indicates their high position in the old days since only the very wealthy could afford to have one brought to their "fazendas". The fine old furniture is of mimosa or jacaranda, but though ostentatious, much of it is now useless trash, which is heaped up in the rooms. Echoing the Father's words, the pharmacist finds in all this apparent physical comfort only the partial survival of vanished days.

Such manifestations of wealth and position recall the illustrious past in which generations of Meneses were perhaps more innocent, sincere, calmer, and happier, because their way of life had a vibrant meaning and purpose. Unfortunately, through quarrels and dissensions among themselves, this almost idyllic time has been succeeded by an era of disorder and carelessness physically, morally, and spiritually, debasing the old qualities which had earned the family the respect and esteem of the entire territory. With the loss of their old prestige,

the Meneses withdrew more and more into themselves, damming up themselves and their potentialities within their decadent possessions in complete isolation from the rest of the world. In the close quarters of their small center of life it is natural to expect them to work out their passions and hatreds on one another. In this stagnant pool of humanity the Meneses somehow manage to live, but Nina finds its overly peaceful life unendurable, and predicts that she will decay from the sadness of that closed-up atmosphere.

Because of the pent-up emotions of hatred evidenced by every member of the family toward most if not all of the others, such a seemingly peaceful house has gradually become the stronghold of evil. Gossip believes it stems from the evil of the earlier Meneses which has poisoned the whole atmosphere of the house. Everyone of the townspeople, including the doctor, senses the restless, uneasy feeling of dense secrecy which weighs upon the "Chácara". The Father himself can find no better definition of inferno than the "Chácara" wherein ferment all the passions and repressed emotions of its inhabitants.

Since it is the symbol of the degeneracy of the Meneses as well as the repository of their evil, the mansion is also fated to be consumed by its own deterioration and disappear. Its slow death accompanies Nina's and is consummated when she dies. Already in its death throes as is Nina when Valdo departs for Rio de Janeiro, it

almost appears to be a different place with a new life in it, as if awaiting important events. Valdo's sorrow sharpens his perception and he has a premonition that she, like other gravely ill patients, only stirs and opens her eyes to behold her own death. Nina's funeral becomes an occasion for gawking curiosity-seekers to invade the house like a band of vultures circling the dying victim which Valdo realizes signifies the true end of the Meneses. After the shocking events of that afternoon and the subsequent death or disappearance of the family's members, the mansion is sacked by an outlaw and abandoned to the jungle which completes its domination over it and destruction of its ruins.

#### The Gardens and the Pavilion

Fleeing the aristocratic setting of the "Chácara," both Nina and Ana find love, or a form of passion, in adulterous affairs with a young gardener who as such is beneath their social level. The locations for this moral degradation are the gardens and the pavilion, signifying the wild free force of nature unhampered by the inhibitions of traditions such as are contained in the mansion. These gardens, like the rest of the estate, had once been formal and well taken care of, but have gradually been abandoned to nature and have reverted to forest vegetation. However, when Nina first arrives, the Meneses still retain a gardener. Nina's restlessness soon leads her into an affair with him, against a background of the violets he plants for her, as

well as a clearing once delineated by statues of the four seasons, of which only Summer and part of Spring still stand, and finally, the lonely pavilion.

The forest makes the paths ever narrower and seems to isolate the pavilion completely from the "Chacara". This building had been constructed rapidly and haphazardly with cheap material as distinguished from the care taken in the construction of the mansion. This again seems to give it an atmosphere of freedom from the brooding spirit of the Meneses. It is thus in this abandoned garden cottage that Nina and Valdo are happiest. This becomes a refuge for her, a place where she almost seems able to revive dreams of the ancient Meneses and of a time without cares or preoccupations.

Finally, however, the evil which haunts the manor house comes even here. The place is considered unhealthy as the forest grows thicker, and a little dangerous when it has been abandoned once more after Alberto's suicide. Consequently, it is a condemned building given over to rats, insects, and lizards. It is here where Alberto died that Nina and Andre carry on their romance. Andre intuitively realizes that this heavy, musty, suffocating atmosphere and the objects of the cottage appear to have a secret, intimate life derived from past events and defined by the presence of Nina.

. . . nessa penumbra que me envolve, é uma sensação difusa de poder, de estar participando de alguma coisa oculta e violenta (o acontecimento de sangue--em que época,

com quem?) e que pelo seu sabor não se podia intitular senão de--o mal. A atmosfera do mal. E a esta atmosfera, era impossível deixar de reconhecer, pertencia o ser que eu amava. Não por isto a que ela chamava de pecado, mas pelo próprio fato de existir, de respirar, de ser enfim ela mesma, com essa essência esponjosa e morna das anêmonas-do-mar. Porque a verdade é que só ali Nina se realizava integralmente, florescia, recendia e brilhava, como um objeto sempre novo entre aquelas coisas carcomidas pelo tempo. Era a ela que designava o odor subterrâneo e mofado. Então era preciso reconhecer que aquela criatura fragil encarnava o mal, o mal humano, de modo simples e sem artifício.<sup>1</sup>

This cottage, the location of the consummation of so much love, hope, hatred, and evil, is to be the last of the Meneses' holdings to disappear, after witnessing the despairing death of Ana who takes shelter in it when she must abandon the fallen "Chácara".

### Violets

Violets are interwoven into the novel as a leit motif of Nina's life and death. Her first act upon arrival at the mansion is to pluck a violet. Her introduction to Alberto is marked by his gift to a bouquet of her favorite flowers. As indications of their love, he plants large flower beds of violets for her, and leaves a bouquet on her window sill each morning. Their daily disappearance causes a quarrel between the lovers in which Nina displays not only her anger but also how much she values this demonstration of his love. Their fragrance is her identifying scent. On one of her first meetings with Timóteo,

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<sup>1</sup>Cardoso, op. cit., p. 332.

she predicts that she will be the first of the family to die, and makes him promise to bring violets to her coffin. His fulfillment of this promise is to be the consummation of his vengeance. Betty has to search for the few remaining violets of the now vanished gardens for Timoteo to scatter over her corpse in a last tribute to his friend in the struggle against the Meneses.

Violets are, then, not only part of her life and death, but become their very symbol. These flowers are small and delicate, shun the sun and grow only in dark, dank recessed places. Nina, too, prefers a dark room to any open countryside and feels best in an enclosed place like Timoteo's sealed room or the pavilion. Violets suggest the human solitude of the main characters by their own shrinking away from the world. They are connected with sorrow and death through the purple coloring, an ancient aristocratic color of mourning. Even an excess of their odor becomes misty and sickeningly sweet, recalling a similar description of the smell emanating from Nina's cancer.

Violets also are connected with Timoteo. They symbolize for him not only a link with the world, reality, and love, but even his final comprehension of his sins. He realizes that only love is immortal, that God truly exists, and that He is like violets whose season never passes.

## Diseases

The various diseases mentioned throughout the novel and Nina's agonizing death are deeper and more obvious symbols of the violent corrosion of moral and spiritual values in the family. Indicative of Demétrio's state of mind regarding the events at the "Chácara" are his headaches, feelings of strangulation, and other such disturbances to which he is subject. An epidemic ends by decimating the town, and takes the life of the last of the Meneses. Disease is even used as a sort of bogeyman when Valdo keeps André from penetrating Timóteo's room by telling him his uncle has leprosy, a particularly revolting and flesh consuming disease. This precipitates a mental crisis for the boy when his idolized mother pays the man a visit. Indeed mental disturbances play a part in this symbolism of destruction since the whole family regards Timóteo as being insane. Again, Timóteo is but a reflection of the whole since the action of every Meneses can be regarded as at least somewhat irrational and often dangerously unbalanced.

Paralysis in the very soul of the family is already suggested by the brief indications allotted to the lives of Nina's father and the Meneses' matriarch, Dona Malvina. Both were confined to wheel-chairs. Nina's father grew more irascible as the years passed after the violent accident in which he was crippled by the premature explosion of a grenade. In his frenzy to retain a grasp on life, he

resorted to commanding affection from his daughter and attempting to bribe friendship from the Colonel.

Even more dynamic and overbearing was the presence of D. Malvina. In her lifetime, despite her own paralysis, there was still a feeling of vitality and health in the family and house, which afterward stagnated and seemed condemned to an inevitable death. The unusually dark day in which she died became to Father Justino's mind a presage of the coming decadence which was to take hold of the Meneses after her death.

The most graphic physical indication that something is drastically wrong with the state of this family is Nina's health and manner of death. From the very beginning, she suffers from ill health, though at first only in minor ways, such as headaches and upsets caused by her acute restlessness. She, too, comes to endure paralysis, this time caused by a nervous disorder. Such an illness appears to be largely psychosomatic based on her conflicts with the Colonel and the Meneses, and even by a certain nostalgia for the "Chácara" where she had known passion and some comfort as well as hatred.

As stated previously, the house seems to be slowly consumed by an internal tumor. This interpretation of a state of mind becomes reality when Nina contracts cancer. Its full implications can only be appreciated when one regards her as the very symbol of the spiritual corruption of the Meneses. Betty could have said of the once-glorious



family as she does of Nina that she does not have the right to hurt herself, nor to decay, nor even to end as did others for she is untouchable in her grandeur and dignity. Yet as rebellious as each is in fighting her destiny, each is gradually consumed by her own internal corruption. Instead of pulsating life, each becomes the locale of death which impresses upon her the seal of its sorrow as each decomposed as if under the force of a violent internal combustion. The evil spread throughout flesh and spirit in a slow, irremediable destruction. This illness becomes an unusual act with unforeseeable consequences because it is not based on facts relative to this world alone. It is coupled with the distinct shadow of the supernatural. In Demétrio's mind, her agonizing death comes to be mystically connected with the decay of his house and family, and forecasts their imminent dissolution. His life has been dedicated to preserving the ideals and image of his once illustrious family even while he observes its inevitable progression toward ruin. Death, then, becomes an adversary which he must fight somehow in order to be true to his principles. In this way, Nina's illness assumes the proportions of the will and judgment of God which is to be enacted against the Meneses since contraction of cancer is considered as a sign of the inflexible condemnation by God of the victim. Ana especially expresses this troglodyte view of God. For her, Nina's disease is to manifest His existence.

As hateful and repulsive as sin is the odor which permeates the house and impregnates every article within it with the sickening breath of agony. It makes the mansion's inhabitants acutely aware of the decomposition of human fiber, and signifies the similar dissolution which sin is operating upon their souls. Demétrio becomes almost frenzied in his desire to close every window and lock the gate against intruding visitors who he feels come only to smell the rotten decay of the cancer, symbol of the deterioration of the Meneses.

The Predominant Image: Poison

Certain images recurring throughout the novel as nouns, adjectives, or verbs also contribute to the pervading atmosphere of accumulated sins and their destructiveness. Paralysis, for example, is found not only as a form of illness, but as illustration of the stagnant, quiet atmosphere of the mansion where a common, effortless life seems to paralyse the people and even the landscape around it.

The most all-inclusive image is the destructive process of corruption and deterioration implied by the use of poison as well as the allied image of serpents. The evil committed by the former Meneses is regarded as having poisoned the very atmosphere of the "Chácara". This once powerful citadel of the family is now laid vulnerable to self-destruction as if it were a body writhing with gangrenous poisons within its blood. In like manner, Nina's agony

and the fall of the Meneses can be compared to the effects of gangrene.

Gangrena, carne desfeita, arroxçada e sem serventia, por onde o sangue já não circula, e a força se esvai, delantando a pobreza do tecido e essa eloqüente miséria da carne humana. Velas em fúria, escravizadas à alucinação de um outro ser oculto e monstruoso que habita a composição final de nossa trama, famélico e desregrado, erguendo ao longo do terreno vencido os esteios escarlates de sua vitória mortal e purulenta.<sup>1</sup>

Love itself in such a location is spoken of as creating a poisonous atmosphere.

Of the entire family, Valdo is the only one who escapes some manner of comparison with this venom. Demétrio's hate directed against Nina is called accumulated poison. Betty in debating over André's problems and how to help him, concludes sadly that in reality she can do nothing. He is like a plant which must grow in accordance with its own nature and manifest whatever hidden forces may be in his own soul, which like contaminating germs or poisons are shaping and influencing him.

Most of these images cluster around Ana and Nina illustrating the deteriorating soul of the one, and the destructive powers of the other. Ana in her confessions speaks of her envenomed heart which is dead to any form of love or passion aside from that of pure hatred. The house and type of life led by the Meneses comes to represent a

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<sup>1</sup>Cardoso, op. cit., p. 144.

sort of suffocating darkness which causes her spirit to feel poisoned by it. Her hatred and jealousy lead her to despair because she cannot help Alberto, poisoned by his love for Nina, to forget the other woman. His delay in committing suicide brings a poisonous sort of happiness to her because she hopes that he may not have loved Nina so deeply after all. She later refers to her attempts to recreate the life he led through her imagination as saturating herself with his memory as if it were a toxic substance. Her hatred of Nina reaches such depths that she attempts to kill her, justifying her act as one of self-defense since she regards her rival as little more than a poisonous animal. Not only does she detest everyone else, but she also scorns herself with the same hatred felt for a deadly serpent.

On the other hand, Nina's beauty is referred to as fragile yet venomous. Her disdain and contempt can be as potent as poison. Her survey of Ana from head to toe in appraisal of her drabness is characterized by a smile containing all the venom in the world. From this instant, she and Nina are to be implacable enemies. Words exchanged between them take on poisonous intentions. Betty feels that Nina's presence in the mansion is like that of a poisonous, decomposing leavening, permeating the household, everything that happens in it, the atmosphere, even time itself.

Possivelmente nem ela própria teria consciência disto, limitava-se a existir, com a exuberância e o capricho de certas plantas venenosas; mas pelo

simples fato de que existia, um elemento a mais, dissociador, infiltrava-se na atmosfera e devagar ia destruindo o que em torno constituía qualquer demonstração de vitalidade. E precisamente como essas plantas, que num terreno árido se levantam ardentes e belas, viria mais tarde a florescer sozinha, mas num terreno sêco e esgrouvinhado pela faina da morte.<sup>1</sup>

The most important function of this image is to serve as an illustration of Timóteo's revenge on his family, providing the key to everything which will follow and the reason for the continuous use of poison as an image. He plans to instil hatred, sin, and shame like poisons into the very spirit of the Meneses through his catalytic agent, Nina, until these corrosive agents destroy the family completely forever.

### Maria Sinhá

The memory and portrait of Maria Sinhá appears to haunt the "Chácara" like the spirit of revolt against the dictates of the Meneses tradition. Her portrait had once dominated the living room until Timóteo's strange fascination in it as well as a sense of fidelity to the Spirit of the Meneses led Demétrio to hide it in the cellar. Yet the memory of her cannot be so easily erased since a large stain remains on the wall as a constant reminder. Nina and Betty make a pilgrimage to the cellar in order to see this portrait which arouses

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<sup>1</sup>Cardoso, op. cit., p. 233.

in them an unhappy sense of having violated a secret which should remain in the darkness of the past and forgetfulness. Her face reveals her to have been a severe woman turned inward on her own emotions, uninterested in petty considerations, and completely disillusioned with worldly vanity. She had been a woman who dominated and repressed her violent emotions even as she obeyed no law but her own nor recognized any truth but her own. In all this she can be seen to have been a true Meneses, albeit a rebel, a particle of the cell containing all the energies and characteristics of the family. Yet in her, as later in Timóteo, these energies were channeled into gestures of rebellion against the Meneses and their tradition because she was absolutely incapable of accepting life within its usual limitations.

### Timóteo

Such inability to live life on any but his own terms also characterizes Timóteo, and motivates his abnormal tendencies toward every form of perversion, whether physical, mental, moral, or even spiritual.

Physically, he makes himself into a grotesque reflection of the ancient glory of his decadent family as well as a terrible caricature of their whole world. He withdraws into his room as if in self-inflicted burial, subsisting in its darkness, ever-growing filth, and accumulated dust. He meditates on his revenge and the destruction of his family,

like an enormous parasite eating away at the heart of the Meneses. Only in such isolation and absolute solitude does he feel that he can live in complete truth with himself. Once he felt that it was criminal to follow one's own truth because it should be a law pertaining to everyone. The time came when he could no longer pretend to be the same as everyone else when he is so completely different. He has become an allegory of the courage he had not had because though he now lives by his own law, he is isolated, as if in a cage, from mankind. He feels he has been condemned by the restrictions imposed by the traditions of the Meneses. The only liberty given to any member is to become a monster in his own eyes. His triumph over them will only come when he abandons his fear and shows the world what he is and what his family has become because everything Demétrio hates in him is only the manifestation of his own blood.

Timóteo believes that the spirit of Maria Sinhá has been re-incarnated in him because both always wanted clothing different from what they should use. Just as she dressed and acted like a man, he turns to luxurious clothing and jewels. His extreme attachment to his mother who had been famous for her fabulous wardrobe led him to take her gowns and jewels to wear himself. He also uses make-up in an uncontrollable exaggeration as if he has subordinated all sense of good taste and moderation to a gesture of personal insult. He has

even allowed his hair to grow and contains it in two braids which resemble wild vines or roots escaping an ill-treated trunk.

Even as he plots the destruction of the Meneses, his bitter personal knowledge of his plans as well as perhaps an attempt to escape the monotony of the same four walls for so many years, and even a defiant attempt of self-destruction coinciding with his self-burial lead him to follow his natural predilections and lose himself in the stupors of alcoholism. His flesh can no longer be contained by the dresses which once had given so much luster to the social chronicle of the Meneses. They become ripped and torn rags as if the excess and deformities were scarring the material. This completes his bodily devastation and makes him a puffy, swollen mass instead of a man. His sheer immensity makes him seem lifeless, and de-vitalized. The fat almost hides his eyes and molds an exotic and horrible mask on his face.

Timóteo also carries within him a hidden force of hatred and destruction which is reflected in the marine imagery connected with him.

. . . naquela figura espetacular, que parecia aglomerar em si todo o esforço da inatividade, do ócio e do abandono, havia qualquer coisa marinha secreta, como se escorresse sobre êle o embate invisível das águas, rolando a êsmo a massa amorfa que o compunha, e onde repousava, mortal e silenciosa, a palidez de distantes solidões lunares.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Cardoso, op. cit., p. 472.



## HUMAN SOLITUDE: THE MENESES TRADITION AND REACTION

The Meneses family is completely isolated from contact with the outside world in an attempt to preserve and protect the name and memory of an illustrious, but dead past. This isolation tends to intensify their abnormal tendencies which are, however, repressed and contained within their closed, stagnant world. These influence their relationships with each other and with regard to the house.

Of these solitary beings encompassed by their own deficiencies and errors, Valdo and André have the saddest relationship. Though father and son, there is an insurmountable barrier between them even in moments of mutual sorrow which prevents their understanding and comforting each other. André feels nothing in relation to his father. Valdo finds it impossible to circumvent the relationship between his son and Nina because the boy feels his father is jealous of him and will be content only when he destroys him and his mother. At their last encounter over Nina's corpse, each realizes that the other is a stranger to him.

The rest of the family relations are no more felicitous. Nina and Valdo never understand the reasons behind each other's actions and are reduced to squabbling and accusations. Valdo comes to realize that it is because they never really could talk to each other.

There are so many important things between people to be discussed, yet they can spend their whole lives together without ever learning the truth about what the other thinks and believes. As Nina lies dying, Valdo wonders for the first time if she had believed in God and is struck by the realization they had never asked each other a single question which would reveal the other's thoughts. His lamentation is for their happiness which was lost through lack of mutual understanding. Yet for him to ever have completely understood Nina, she would have had to surrender a part of herself which would be impossible for her to have done. His love contains too much of a sense of paternal protection and even pity to be acceptable to someone as violently independent as Nina. It may even be that he regrets not so much her lack of love for him as the fact that she never allowed him to help her in any way, and lived completely estranged from him and his feelings. Part of the guilt for their strained relations is also his. Dominated by resentment of her actions, he did not love her sufficiently to really attempt to understand the motives behind her actions. Her death finally forces him to face himself and challenge Demétrio and the tradition of the Meneses. This is the only demonstration of his love which had been destroyed by the cold house and its stifling tradition, and even his own adherence to this evil spirit of the Meneses.

Ana is probably intended to demonstrate the most complete portrait of the deep and tormenting feeling of human solitude. The

other members of the family either scorn her or are completely indifferent toward her. Finding no one who cares enough about her to offer her consolation, friendship, or pardon hardens her spirit completely. Her repressed emotions can find no release through love since it does not seem to exist for her. Her consuming passions are consequently hatred and jealousy of Nina who seems to have everything she does not.

Demétrio has also always hidden his true self as if behind solid walls. He has very little interest or pity for those around him and rejects their interest in him. His existence resembles that of certain isolated plants who live in the air, complete unto themselves. There comes a time, however, when he needs the consolation of human compassion and solidarity with those around him. Shorn of his apparent superiority, Valdo finds him a contemptible person who needs as much pity as the rest of mankind. He realizes his brother's fear is based on the realization that with the last of the Meneses, the name and monument of a despotic family which has been his only concern in life will also disappear.

Nina seems to be under the interdict of some stigma of perpetual personal suffering which sets her apart from other people and negates the possibility of her ever being happy. "Um poder qualquer separava-a dos outros, incentivando-lhe êsse clarão particular, atormentado, de onde incessantemente estendia as mãos

para os que passavam."<sup>1</sup> To counteract this depression, she needs the activity and excitement of a city life. Though she loves Valdo, it is not enough to make her able to bear the lonely, static life of the "Chácara" because she was not made to live in such utter peace and so cannot find in it her definitive ideal of existence. This leads her inevitably to a flirtation and affair with Alberto, as it later will with André. Even while loving her, Betty comes closest to realizing her personal disaster. Nina simply does not have the disposition to be happy. Instead, her being seems to aspire toward misfortune and adversity as if unhappiness were as necessary for her as the air she breathes.

The interwoven actions of such beings reveal the moral and spiritual decline and fall of the Meneses. In order to understand this chronicle, one must remember what the family had represented, and how this position was to lead to its degeneration as represented by the struggle between Demétrio and Timóteo. Much of their heritage is only suggested by the meager evidence presented. The Meneses would seem to be one of the old aristocratic families whose family tree has roots extending back to the early days of "Mineiro" history. Valdo's verdict of them is that they were a despotic family based on their pride, position, and money. This wealth was probably founded

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<sup>1</sup>Cardoso, op. cit., p. 210.

almost exclusively upon slave labor to exploit their large landholdings as one may infer from the large cemetery of slaves. By virtue of their riches, they became the social leaders of the county and dominated its life to such an extent that even decades later their descendents were still to command the respect and deference of its people. Their prestige is even greater than that of the wealthier and more noble Baron of Santo Tirso.

E de onde vinha esse prestígio, que poder garantia a essa mansão em decadência o seu fascínio, ainda intato como uma herança poética que não fôra roída pelo tempo? Seu passado, exclusivamente seu passado, feito de senhores e sinhazinhas que haviam sido tios, primos e avós daquele Sr. Valdo que agora ia ao meu lado -- Meneses todos, que através de lendas, fugas e romances, de uniões e histórias famosas, tinham criado a "alma" da residência, aquilo que incólume e como suspenso no espaço, sobreviveria, ainda que seus representantes mergulhassem para sempre na obscuridade.<sup>1</sup>

This illustrious past was ended by the law of abolition in 1888, and the proclamation of the Republic in 1889, destroying the basis of their wealth and aristocratic privileges. To the plantation and slave-owners, abolition meant financial decline, if not ruin.<sup>2</sup> The Meneses began to slowly lose everything in a series of disastrous financial ventures and produced nothing to replace the income they had

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<sup>1</sup>Cardoso, *op. cit.*, pp. 237-238.

<sup>2</sup>José Lins do Rego's Ciclo da Cana de Açúcar is the most representative series in Northeastern literature about this social and economic change.

exhausted. They derive a living by renting or selling portions of their land. Otherwise, they seemingly do nothing but wait for the slow extinction of themselves and their name. In their way, they typify the difficulties and complexities of a class which had once been wealthy and now is merely hanging on, hiding beneath a show of liberality by spending beyond their means, and assuming an air of provincial "fidalgos". Perhaps not unnaturally, such families as the Meneses even though realizing this change in their lives refuse to reveal their financial straits to the townspeople, whom they despise. To shield themselves from outsiders and prevent the general knowledge of what this fine, old family has deteriorated into, they take refuge in family tradition and the strict privacy of their homes. Even Betty found it hard to believe that normal human beings could live so completely isolated from the rest of the world. In contrast to the days when fabulous parties were held, she has never seen a guest in the "Chácara" during her residence there until the end of its existence when the young doctor comes to treat Nina and subsequently everyone invades the "Chácara" to attend the wake.

All this demonstrates a certain rancidity in their relations toward strangers. Nina senses this animosity toward herself based on intolerance for an outsider who represents a new life from a different place.

Such families as the Meneses were accustomed to intermarriages which probably accounts for their degeneracy of blood and spirit as

evidenced most clearly by the strange Timóteo. Endogamy is also responsible for the strong similarities in physical characteristics marking the various members of the Meneses. The large size and shape of the nose, signifying sensuality, is especially noteworthy and is often mentioned as the most prominent facial feature in each member of the family.<sup>1</sup> Valdo apparently could find no one worthy of a Meneses in Vila Velha so he has to go to Rio to find a wife. At that, Nina is only the daughter of an Italian actress and crippled ex-military officer who marries him with the mistaken notion he is wealthy. Demétrio, however, had considered Ana's family as suitable. She had been raised with this prospect in mind so she received an education as befitted a Meneses which turns her into an inhibited, drab, loveless creature. Only later does she realize the unrestrained world of emotion and adventure she might have had. By now, however, she has assimilated so well the system of the Meneses that she becomes a typical representative of them. Father Justino judges her inability to reveal her feelings and her almost complete lack of naturalness as signs of the spirit of the house. It signifies a wish to remain within the limits of a solid realism and never violate the dictates of good sense and taste essential for managing worldly affairs. They have

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<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of such prominent characteristics which distinctly mark each family, see Gilberto Freyre, Nordeste, Rio de Janeiro, José Olímpio, 1937.

chosen this earthly measure of goodness as their supreme norm of existence. In fact, the Meneses are so linked in people's minds as symbols of utmost propriety that they are genuinely shocked when one of them departs from these rigid rules. The doctor demonstrates Valdo's troubled soul by describing his disheveled appearance and manner of dress. For him, anything could be understood except a Meneses appearing in town without a tie.

From Demétrio, Ana learns that the blood of the Meneses created a certain soul to inhabit the "Chácara". Indeed, the only support of the family in the midst of its spiritual stagnation is this soul of the Meneses which remains as unchanged as the iron foundation of a crumbling brick wall. As it sustains and even fortifies them against the loss of the respect they formerly invoked and their lack of material comfort, this quality makes them Meneses more than ever.

Nina is contemptuous of this spirit which makes them so silent and parsimonious of gestures. Even after a long absence she can predict their attitudes and actions because they confine themselves to certain activities and opinions. Her attitude toward this silent house is expressed in her verbal sneer toward Ana, and incidentally the Meneses symbolized by her, who will do nothing to disturb the past contained in the mansion.

Não pode, não pode, e eu vou-lhe dizer porquê.  
Porque é uma Meneses, porque o sangue dos Meneses, que  
não é o seu, contaminou-a como de uma doença. Porque



você não quebraria nunca a quietude desta casa com um tiro--a paz, a sacrossanta paz desta família--nem cometeria um incesto, nem um assassinato, nada que manchasse a honra que êles reclamam.<sup>1</sup>

Ana realizes that in truth they are slaves to a habit which they can never break nor change. This even causes the failure of Valdo's marriage. His submission to the family is stronger than his love for Nina and prevents his leaving the "Chácara" to begin a new life elsewhere with her.

Demétrio is the truest of these Meneses since he is the one most concerned about the family tradition and position. Nina regards him as a prejudiced fanatic. Her aversion to the mansion and anything "Mineiro" leads to the enmity between her and Demétrio. The "Chácara" means the tradition and dignified customs of Minas Gerais which he believes to be the only authentic ones in the country. He might have allowed personal attacks to pass unnoticed but not those against his home. "Vem [à casa] do Império, e representa várias gerações de Meneses que aqui vieram com altanería e dignidade."<sup>2</sup> So warped is his personality with regard to protecting this heritage that he is capable of anything if he judges it necessary for the protection of the family honor.

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<sup>1</sup>Cardoso, *op. cit.*, p. 296.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 48.

As guardian of the family traditions, he insists on the preservation of appearances. He will allow no divorce or even separation proceedings between Nina and Valdo because of the scandal it would cause. Demétrio's pride in this respect suffers a blow when he learns that the police will have to be called after the suicide of Alberto. This is the first time they have ever entered the house and he thinks of it almost as a desecration. He is overwhelmed by this as by the consciousness of an inevitable disgrace which will bring the ultimate ruin of the mansion and the shattering of his pride. Still, he faces it with sad resignation instead of revolt.

. . . imaginei o que aquêles homem já devia ter sofrido, o quanto devia ter pago pelo seu orgulho, para que assim chegasse ao fim de todos os seus sonhos, nu e pacificado. Porque havia uma certa paz na sua atitude, uma última e dramática distensão no seu gesto de renúncia e de aceiteamento: ruía a casa dos Meneses, mas a sombra já o alcançava também sepultando-o em seus escombros. Não era só à casa que êle renunciava, era a si próprio, pois não podia aceitar a casa sem a integridade do seu orgulho.<sup>1</sup>

Timóteo's dissipation irritates Demétrio until it provokes a quarrel during which his brother derides him and the Meneses as the depraved descendents of an illegitimate family. He also demolishes Demétrio's cherished dream of receiving the Baron by claiming no nobleman would ever enter that degenerate house. This visit is the

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<sup>1</sup>Cardoso, op. cit., p. 143.

obsession of Demétrio because the aristocratic family, through its immense wealth and direct descendency from the Portuguese Braganças, is the only one in the county which is above that of the Meneses. His whole life becomes oriented toward this visit as if it will be the definitive confirmation of the glory and fame of his family. So enraged is he by this contemptuous iconoclast that he threatens to deprive him of his inheritance and have him committed to an insane asylum if he perseveres in his depraved form of life. Fearful that Demétrio might really carry out his threat, Timóteo makes a citadel of his room and remains shut up in it to plot his revenge. Demétrio becomes his jailer. He feels his brother's death would be preferable to his attempt to ruin the Meneses by covering their name with shame and scandal.

Nina becomes a new threat to Demétrio. Her vitality and beauty causes this reserved, hard man to fall in love for the first time. Yet love for him does not prove to be a good passion. His emotional self-discipline is so strong that he is little accustomed to making concessions to simple human contingencies such as love and death. In him love becomes a destructive and unendurable sickness, indicative of his own moral and spiritual corruption, which he must fight. He comes to regard Nina as a danger not only to his own peace and integrity but also to his home and family tradition as well. His love is therefore expressed through hate.

In order to remove this threat Nina poses to his family, Demetrio resorts to attempting murder. However, "murder" must be qualified because Demétrio is also afflicted with the family disease of decorum which decrees murder is too violent. Rather, he decides on an insidious plan of instigating suicide. Knowing Nina's restlessness and nervous state, he hopes that by revealing her affair with Alberto, she will be driven to such despair that she will take her own life with the revolver he carelessly displays in the mansion in order to supply the suggestion and the opportunity. His disgust can be imagined when his plot backfires and his brother attempts suicide when Nina is leaving him because of Demétrio's accusations. He is extremely irritated over Valdo's "imprudence" of interfering when he should not.

Judging by these events, the author appears to be saying that it is always dangerous to awaken a deep emotion in a person who has spent his life suppressing any emotions or sentiments for another person. Such repression causes a spiritual degeneration. If someone disturbs this state and releases such pent-up emotions, they will probably be revealed as of the most evil variety. People are after all not completely static beings, but changeable creatures. Nina exercises a curious effect on the shaping of the personalities of the Meneses as if she were a catalytic agent releasing unsuspected

emotions and reactions in the people around her.<sup>1</sup> There are times when it is suggested that she is practicing old-fashioned black magic. Sorcery is a frequent adjective used to describe her effect on other people. Ana feels the Meneses are irremediably linked to her sorcery. Valdo believes she does not know how to restrain herself. She is like an unleashed element or an active force of nature who would have been burned at the stake of an "auto-da-fé" if the Inquisition still existed. This tremendous vitality appears to fascinate the Meneses who by their very natures are unable to act decisively.

The power of her presence is so intense that no one can ever forget the effect she had upon them. Her extraordinary beauty and aura of dignity creates an atmosphere of temptation around her as if she will admit only the existence of a world under her power of enchantment. So completely does this world depend on her for its

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<sup>1</sup>Cardoso stated this more clearly in A Luz No Sub-solo:

A sua figura despertava nêle um mundo de sensações absurdas, como se tôda ela fôsse um apêlo a secretas regiões do seu ser. Cada criatura arrasta o seu mistério--tôdas elas o possuem, inteiramente defendido da curiosidade alheia. Pedro sabia que nenhuma outra alma pode descer onde fermentam as vagas dessas marés que se movem constantemente. Pois fôra a esse mundo que Emanuela viera despertar íntimas relações, fôra essa treva que ela viera agitar com o seu olhar humilde.

manifestations of life and emotions that when she is absent all activity ceases, and they merely exist, as they had done before she came. Because of this power she paves the way toward the end of the Meneses by her impulsive acts and unrestrained emotions which awaken in each a realization of a vital life of passions they have never had. It is this quality which makes Timóteo instinctively realize that she is the instrument of his revenge.

Desde o primeiro minuto senti que ela era um desses seres insubstituíveis, com uma força ativa e transcendente, que nos aconteceu como um pé-de-vento nos apanha na extensão da noite. Que carnalmente fosse ela, e tivesse um nome, e viesse trazida pela mão de outro--que tangida pelas próprias leis internas não demorasse nunca--que importava tudo isto? São êsses, precisamente, os seres que em qualquer sentido não demoram nunca. E a verdade é que encarnava para mim, de modo completo, o ser que desde há muito eu esperava. Agora que não existe mais, poderia chamá-la pelo nome, baixinho, como se pretendesse vê-la de volta, mas isto para mim não designaria a personalidade que significou, e sim a tradução humana e truncada do poder com que se projetou em nosso meio. Reduzo o tempo, anulo palavras: logo à primeira vista, com êsse faro especial de que são dotadas certas vítimas, os Meneses souberam que se achavam diante de uma espécie de anjo exterminador.<sup>1</sup> [*Italics mine.*]

In this role, Nina not only is the catalyst, but also is a victim because she displays the symbols and actions of deterioration and depravity.

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<sup>1</sup>Cardoso, Crônica . . . , pp. 460-461.

Nina's hatred of Demétrio and his devotion to the Meneses' tradition unconsciously makes her an ally of Timóteo. He is the reverse reflection of Demétrio in his characterization of revolt against the family, and with him forms the composite representative of the spirit of the Meneses. He is haunted by the memory of Maria Sinhá who symbolizes the spirit of revolt in the family because of her refusal to accept life within the trite limitations imposed by the Meneses. To him, she was the noblest, purest, and most misunderstood of them all. Had she lived any place except that isolated section of Minas Gerais she probably would have become a great figure. She conceivably might have become the protecting spirit of the family but had directed her energy into audacious and shameless acts which amazed and often terrified her contemporaries. She was considered godless, because she obeyed her own will alone. She whipped her slaves unmercifully if they got in her way or disobeyed her. She even maltreated a priest who came to administer extreme unction to a slave. She took luxurious baths of milk and perfume, but dressed like a man and did a man's work better than most of the riders on the ranch. Timóteo's gesture of affront seems to resurrect her to annihilate her enemies for all time because the Meneses, regardless of the persons involved, are her eternal enemies just as they are his.

Just as Demétrio's only concern has been to protect the family name, Timóteo's has been in the perfection of his plan to ruin it.

By himself, he might not have accomplished his aim, but Nina gives his unspoken plans impetus and consummation. His plot for the downfall of his evil, oppressive family is simple but devilishly ingenious. Through Nina he intends to poison the very soul of the Meneses.

Um dia, no jardim, /Padre Justino/ disse-me que o pecado é quase sempre uma coisa ínfima, um grão de areia, um nada--mas que pode destruir a alma inteira. Ah, Betty, a alma é uma coisa forte, uma força que não se vê, indestrutível. Se uma minúscula parcela de pecado--um nada, um sonho, um desejo mau--pode destruí-la, que não fará uma dose maciça de veneno, uma culpa instilada gôta a gôta no coração que se quer destruir?<sup>1</sup>

The sins Nina causes in the various Meneses as well as her own, and her manner of death prepare the moment in which Timóteo can complete the execution of his plans to so cover the name of the Meneses with scandal as to destroy them completely. Strangely enough, after her death, her catalytic spirit seems to become infused with Timóteo's soul to instil in him the necessary ability to expose the family and ruin them. "Era um retrato traçado a mão firme, uma presença inteira, alguém que eu conhecera, e que só eu, por um milagre de fidelidade, poderia recompor em sua delineação exata."<sup>2</sup>

Nina's wake becomes the fundamental day in the existence of the Meneses. Having learned that the Baron is at last to visit the mansion

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<sup>1</sup>Cardoso, op. cit., p. 110.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 460.



to pay his respects, Timóteo knows that the time has come to fulfil his dream of assassinating the spirit, pride, and glory of his house. Exactly when the position of the Meneses seems to be firmly established, he avenges himself through a gesture which means the death of their name and honor. Actually, however, the figure of the Baron has already exposed the ridiculous pretenses of Demétrio's dreams, ambitions, and sense of respect. This man whose presence was to confirm that glory of the Meneses is an absurd figure, short, fat, imperious, concerned only in the continuous eating of sweets. His face is so marked by this excess sugar that it has the repugnant appearance of greasy ham. He is, in fact, yet another example of the decadence of these families whose lives are spent in reflecting the glories of the past.

Timóteo's grotesque appearance reveals what the apparently fine family has become. Demétrio is mortally wounded because he will have to pay for this shame-filled insult with the sacrifice of his pride. Timóteo thus consummates his desires for the destruction of the house of Meneses. This is the meaning of the title, Crônica da Casa Assassinated, since in Portuguese as in English, house may mean not only a building, but also a family and its patrimony. Through hatred and depravity, the last generation of Meneses instigated by Timoteo has conspired to the symbolic destruction and murder of their heritage from the past.

## SPIRITUAL AND MORAL DEGRADATION: THE CONCEPT OF GOD AND EVIL

The Meneses as a whole suffer from an illness which may be defined as decadence in their soul. This causes their estrangement from God. His absence in the "Chácará" is so decisive and tangible that it forms a vacuum of accusation around them. The faith of their ancestors has been replaced by indifference and scepticism concerning religious matters. As a result, everyone, with the possible exception of Valdo, reveals some depravity in their emotions as they violate ethical standards and display the corruption of their moral ideals in order to satisfy their own desires and pleasures.

The Crónica is a striking illustration of the multiplicity of the views of truth. Each person is attempting to live according to his own concept of truth, even though it may be a mistaken idea of what the truth is. Each reflects one facet of the supreme truth but none has it entirely. André's future estrangement from mankind is marked by what he believes to be his sin of incest committed with Nina while in reality he is Ana's son, not Nina's.

Such an incestuous affair is, of course, designed to be the culminating point in the depths of degradation and depravity that the house of the Meneses has reached. It would also seem to be an effort

on the part of the author to illustrate Gide's statement, "Dans le domaine des sentiments le réel ne se distingue pas de l'imaginaire."<sup>1</sup> In other words, André's problem is not his imagined sin, but his own soul which drives him to become what he believes to be the most solitary and desperate of lovers. The suggestion of an Oedipus Complex evidenced by him is also shown by Timóteo whose mother fixation leads to his strange manner of dress and his tendencies of homosexuality. Furthermore, this perverted interest in Alberto ironically becomes the means toward his salvation.

Alberto provides a vision of beauty and love which are closely linked to God not only in the mind of Timóteo, but also in Ana's. To her, God manifests his blessing to certain privileged people by their beauty and the love they receive. She feels God is unjust because he deprived her of her share of these in order to increase that of Nina. She rejects the efforts of Father Justino to help her because she feels damnation is a solitary flame attacking the individual for his particular evil deeds and insults to God which explains her later attitude toward Nina's cancer. Her debates with Father Justino reveal the religious position of the novel which seems to waver between the necessity of personal revelation from God and man's obligation to seek God and to accept his own burden of guilt.

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<sup>1</sup>André Gide, Les Faux-Monnayeurs, Paris: Gallimard, 1925, p. 94.

Father Justino comes to regard the mansion as a stagnant pool of hatred and sin resembling inferno. It has come under the spell of the devil through its self-assurance and calm, trusting in the security of reality and its traditions, and conscious of the responsibilities pertaining to its name. Tradition causes evil by being transformed into the only representative of truth. Such a home suffers from too much reality because it is based solidly on the earth with no illusions and no chance of glimpsing Heaven. An essential attribute of the Devil is the ability to divest reality of any fiction. The passive becomes the ideal because it does not disrupt the established order. The spirit of such a mansion becomes cold and soulless by its very immutability, and the cold tranquility of its inhabitants. Absolute certainty becomes the most diabolic thing in the world because it leaves no room for love. Everything firm and positive is a negation of the power of love. The Father believes Heaven is not a calm place of repose, but a place of struggle beyond man's limited possibilities to apprehend while Hell is a boundless white space in time. In order to accomplish His good, God must at times assume a mask of apparent evil because His law springs from boundless energy and a vital life to the detriment of static conformation imposed by tradition.

Deus, ai de nós, muitas v<sup>ê</sup>zes, assume o aspecto do mal. Deus é quase sempre tudo o que rompe a superfície material e dura do nosso existir cotidiano--porque Ele não é o pecado, mas a Graça. Mais ainda: Deus é

acontecimento e revelação. Come supô-Lo um movimento estático, um ser de inércia e de apaziguamento? Sua lei é a da tempestade, e não a da calma.<sup>1</sup>

The importance of the concept of sin is in this. Saints struggle in an abyss of emotions, not of peace and quiet. Without sin there can never be the triumph of good in a person. There is no virtue unless there is first a battle between good and evil. This is the explanation of why Nina feels she has lost everything. She renounced the dream of her love for Alberto, sinful as it was by the usual moral standards, to the sterile reality of her marriage linking her to the conventional Meneses.<sup>2</sup> To avoid a repetition of her life's failure in André, she instructs him to assume responsibility for his sin because there is nothing more genuine in his soul than this evil. To preserve himself, he must not let anyone else destroy it through the supposition that he is weak and does not have the courage to live his own life.

Unfortunately, André is basically a weak man. Nina's slow agonizing death reveals his inability to believe in God, or in the hereafter. To him, eternity is here and now, a last image of dreams,

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<sup>1</sup>Cardoso, op. cit., p. 507.

<sup>2</sup>William Blake was the greatest exponent of such an inversion of values. Jesus' sanction of the Ten Commandments honors them more by violation of their precepts than by a strict observation of them. "I tell you no virtue can exist without breaking these commandments. Jesus was all virtue and acted from impulse, not rules." The Marriage of Heaven and Hell in Poetical Works, London: Oxford University Press, 1914, p. 260.

pleasures, sins, loves, and betrayals. This goads man toward the unattainable, which is only his memory of a lost blessing. It is to be found in the nothingness or absolute where man may fuse himself with the perfection which he lacks. Eternity as such is only a delusion inspired by saints and madmen. If God truly exists He is but exercising His tyrannical law over the wretched mankind which He has condemned to an oppressive solitude. So certain is he that God does not concede any hope to his creatures that he answers the dying woman's inquiries with the blunt assurance that no miracle of resurrection exists for anyone. Her corpse so horrifies him, however, that he turns to his father with the same question. Yet he does not want the certainty of eternity in order to repent and be saved, but so that he may be able to face God in an affront for the Creation and exile of mankind. Unable in the last analysis to accept his own failings, he blames God for them. He claims that Christ and His Resurrection are only lies because had they been true he would have loved and respected his parents as such, instead of hating his father and having an affair with his mother.

It is apparent that though his sin has become his only reality he cannot accept his responsibility for it. So traumatic an experience is his apparent incest that his future life is to be haunted by the memory of this woman. She is the only one he truly loves because only with her is his sin complete. Loving her is a way of returning to the one person they were before his birth, a refuge of complete

isolation for him. The fulfilment of his aberrant desires has been carried out against the dictates of his conscience, with almost a delight in the sacrilegious affront to all moral and spiritual laws.

Ah, e nem posso dizer que não tremesse e não suasse ante a extensão do meu pecado, pois repetindo mil e mil vêzes que afagava e mordía a carne que me concebera, ao mesmo tempo encontrava nisto um prazer estranho e mortal, e era como se debruçasse sôbre mim mesmo, e tendo sido o mais solitário dos séres, agora me desfizesse sôbre um enredado de perfume e de nervos que era eu mesmo, minha imagem mais fiel, minha consciência e meu inferno.<sup>1</sup>

His love for Nina has made her into the reflection of his own soul.

Such a narcissistic concept that one only knows oneself through an examination of the inner being has already been hinted by the family's hatred of Timóteo who mirrors its own sins and degeneration.

Ana herself is yet another example of a person who has lost her hope and faith. She believes that mere prayer and church attendance cannot save anyone if God has not first instilled His love and grace in him, both of which He seems to have deprived her. Father Justino regards this utter hopelessness as a sign of an extreme consciousness of the world leaving her without any possibility of help from God.

While he thinks man must seek God in order to find Him as is stated in the Bible, Ana betrays an inability to believe without God having revealed Himself personally to her. This position is clear from the events after Alberto's suicide, which means to her not the will of God nor the beginning of a new life in another world, but only death.

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<sup>1</sup>Cardoso, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

She would be capable of believing in God only through a miracle revealing His presence, hence she sacrilegiously tries to force the Father to resurrect Alberto from the dead.

Her estrangement from God is further demonstrated by her lack of love and grace. God's presence is revealed by energy. Love is an essential part of such energy and grows in intensity through manifestation, as witness Nina's passion for Alberto. Love, however, becomes a weak, passive emotion if it is subjected to tradition and cold reason, as it is among the Meneses. Bred to be a true member of the family, Ana's whole life has been one of repressed emotion. She knows nothing about love and found no passion in the cold man she married. Contact with the young, beautiful, vibrant Nina awakens her belatedly to the realization of life and emotions as against mere existence. Because Ana has become a true Meneses, she can only express herself by sinking into the depths of hatred and depraved acts. The enormous power of Nina's vitality leads her to seek to emulate her in every gesture.

Por mais que fizesse, as distrações que inventasse, não podia perder minha cunhada de vista. Ah, como era bela, como era diferente de mim. Tudo na sua pessoa parecia animado e brilhante. Quando caminhava, fazia girar no espaço uma aura de interêsse e de simpatia--exatamente o oposto do que sucedia a mim, ser opaco, pesadamente colocado entre as coisas, sem nenhum dom de calor ou de comunicação.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Cardoso, *op. cit.*, p. 97.



Because she spies on Nina's every movement, Ana comes to discover her affair with Alberto. This provokes her own morbid interest in him. She deludes herself into believing she would have been able to love him had Nina not intervened. She pursues him in an unsuccessful attempt to arouse some feeling in him for her until she finally forces herself upon him.

Ana cannot then hate Nina for her affairs and sins because her rival is seeking the fulfilment of her ideal love which she had attained with Alberto, and tries to recapture in André even though she must cross the barriers of moral propriety and go against God in order to do it. Ana even understands Nina because she feels God is intimately linked to love, no matter how sinful it may be. Her resentment of Nina stems from God's apparent injustice in bestowing grace, love, and beauty on one person and denying it to another. She cannot imagine Nina suffering because she seems a favored creature of God. Father Justino is saddened by her equation of worldly beauty with Divine Grace, both of which are totally lacking in her. This illustrates once more their dichotomy. He believes mankind cannot expect to understand why God distributes His blessings as He does. Grace is not a free gift but rather is based on the effort of men who have turned to Him. Ana's position is that grace and faith are both gifts which He gives as He wishes and when He wishes.

This is the reason she prays to Him to prove His existence by the annihilation of Nina though she does not expect it to occur. Yet her wish apparently is granted when Nina contracts cancer. To Ana, this abnormal death is a sign of God's condemnation of His supposedly favored creature who has transgressed against His stern laws. It has the force of a miracle for her because it is an abrupt, meaningless punishment which befalls Nina through the will of an angry God. It is proof that a Divine Providence really does watch over everyone and will always hear her.

Even with this assurance, Ana still seems to be lost because she is linked to a worldly view of reason and good rather than to God. In order to serve Him, she feels one must renounce human love. God made her human, and such a renunciation would subtract from her own essence. To accept it and sanctity would be a criminal violence to her soul. She must be true to herself and follow her destiny. Yet she does not entirely adhere to this precept. She is unable to accept her share in the guilt of Alberto's suicide, or to admit that André is truly her own son. Her reason for not having intervened and prevented the suicide is that she wants to destroy Nina by revealing she instigated his death by throwing the pistol out the window. Yet Nina could not have realized Alberto would take the pistol while Ana instinctively knows that sooner or later his despair will drive him to take his life. She never reveals the truth about André's origins because of her dread

of the punishment Demétrio would inflict on her if he found out. She is also scandalized by Nina's apparent lack of conscience and inability to understand the gravity of incest which she accepts in her need to relive her sinful passion for Alberto through André. In the end, Ana comes to feel that Nina must have realized André was not her son, yet she has let him continue to believe he is committing the most heinous of social crimes. Ana vaguely understands that by assuming the responsibility for a sin which was not actually as evil as it appears, Nina has a spiritual greatness which surpasses that of the rest of the family. She cannot emulate the other woman on this point, however. Though she wants the assurance of her salvation because she too had lived and sinned, Father Justino can not give it to her. She has not really understood and accepted the spiritual significance of her sins exactly because she is a Meneses, submissive to their law of decorum.

Perhaps because Timóteo has lived in perpetual revolt against the standards of the Meneses can be found the reason for the miracle of his ultimate realization of the truth of God's existence. Even his self-burial in his room reveals his emotional turmoil. He can not live without passionate exaltation and though he locks himself away he does it with the consciousness of martyrdom whereby he will be lifted above the rest of the Meneses and will become greater than they. When this consolation diminishes and his small world begins to oppress him, he discovers the outer world which he has abandoned in the pagan

godlike Alberto who haunts Nina's window. The death of Alberto removes his link to this world of youth and love. His only thought since then has been the consummation of his hatred by the destruction of the Meneses. At Nina's wake, he feels that the final truth is death, cold indifference like that of the earth. The people gathered there become symbols of a small-minded, suffering humanity limited by its deficiencies. The whole scene indicates the presence of an inferno, a human one determined by their weaknesses and vile acts. This so overwhelms him that he suddenly needs the confirmation of eternity even while doubting if a Meneses ever was capable of believing in immortality. His passionate prayers to God to reveal His existence through a miracle so that he would not be the mere guardian of a body awaiting its moment of decay echo those of Ana. Yet Timóteo goes farther than she ever did because he has turned to God at the propitious moment when his soul is receptive to belief in God and love, instead of clamoring for punishment of his enemies as she does. The appearance of André who bears such a marked resemblance to the young, beautiful, dead Alberto leads him to believe in the fulfilment of Christ's promises. "Did I not tell you," said Jesus, "if you will only believe, you shall see the glory of God?" (John XI, 40; epigraph of the Crónica) He suddenly realizes the truth of the God of love and the deception and sin of his hatred and destruction of the house of Meneses. God as love is alone immortal. As such,

He is an endless Being of understanding, pardon, and beauty. Timóteo, who had been lost by his shame of himself and hatred of his family, now knows he is saved because he has gained faith through this miraculous appearance of the boy. Such faith will continue to grow until he reaches God.

## CONCLUSION

Crônica da Casa Assassinada may be considered as primarily a work of social criticism leveled against the preservation of a decadent social order. The world and its societies are in a constant state of changing evolution. Although the ideals upon which institutions are founded do not change, yet inevitably the institutions themselves must adapt to the new contingencies and situations each age imposes. This is why nothing can ever remain in the same state. If institutions do not progress with this evolving state, they become stagnant and ultimately decay.

In the twentieth century the aristocratic society is such an archaic one. Remnants of this once powerful and meaningful class survive, as is the case of the Meneses. Such representatives of a dying social order try to preserve a way of life which has for the most part disappeared. In such families, the ghosts of their past, when their ideals and traditions had a worth, would seem to be more alive and enduring than the sterile realities of the present generation. José Lins do Rego has already examined such a condition in the Northeast in Ciclo da Cana de Açúcar. His novels, however, approach the problem from the point of view of realistic-naturalism which assigns

a major role to the environment. Lúcio Cardoso, on the other hand, studies the situation from a psychological analysis of the problems arising from this decadent state.

The majority of Cardoso's novels are based on the premise that deep within each human personality exists a mystery. This inner truth is revealed by their own despair filled soliloquies and discussions, and their actions. It is by means of these self-revelations that the reader discovers that each of the Meneses has been inhibited by subjection to the dead past and the consuming idea of their tradition. Just as Timóteo destroys the veil of secrecy and shows to the rest of the world the degeneration of his family, both he and Nina go beyond the barrier of solitude each has hidden himself behind and causes each to comprehend the type of person he is.

Lúcio Cardoso has in this way united his theme of the decadence of an aristocratic family to his major interest in the expression of human solitude. Each of these people is terribly alone. A soul, like a society, must constantly develop its potentiality, or else it withers and dies. They vaguely understand that a personality changes from the influences on it arising from the situations they are in, and the effect other people, especially those who exert almost a catalytic power like Nina, have on them. Each isolates himself within himself and cuts himself off from any contact with the rest of mankind. In this way, they are but condemning themselves. For this reason, the

author permits no hint of joy to creep into the book but rather page follows page of hopelessness and torment. The reader feels it need not have been so, but the Meneses resolutely destroy themselves by instituting their own brand of self-inflicted suffering and misery. They permit themselves no side-excursions or experiments into the emotions of happiness or pleasure in living. They sentence themselves to a solitary existence, scorning love, tenderness, or companionship. In reverse casuistry, they are using bad arguments for a good but lost cause. Their lives therefore seem unnatural and overdrawn, but serve the author's purpose well in illustrating the moral decay of a family, the fall of the house, the end of an era and a way of life.



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