

DOM CASMURRO AND RIOBALDO AS NARRATORS:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT: This article offers a comparison of the narrators in *Dom Casmurro* and *Grande Sertão: Veredas*. It identifies what qualities they have in common and elucidates how they differ. The article also argues that the different motives of these narrators determine how the reader responds to them.

KEYWORDS: Dom Casmurro; Riobaldo; Self-conscious narrator; Reader; *Dom Casmurro*; *Grande Sertão: Veredas*; Machado de Assis; Guimarães Rosa.

RESUMO: O artigo oferece uma comparação dos narradores de *Dom Casmurro* e *Grande Sertão: Veredas*. Identifica as qualidades que têm em comum e elucida como diferem. Também argumenta que os diferentes motivos desses narradores determinam como o leitor responde a eles.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Dom Casmurro; Riobaldo; Narrador auto-consciente; Leitor; *Dom Casmurro*; *Grande Sertão: Veredas*; Machado de Assis; Guimarães Rosa.

Modern Brazilian narrative features many intriguing narrators. Two of the greatest are Dom Casmurro, from Machado de Assis' 1899 novel, *Dom Casmurro*, and Riobaldo, from Guimarães Rosa's *Grande Sertão: Veredas* (1956). These novels continue to captivate us not because of their subject matter, which is not extraordinary, but because of their narrators, who, as literary creations, *are* extraordinary. In both these landmark texts, form dominates content; it is not the story told that matters, it is how it is told. And, above all, who does the telling.

Although in terms of social class, education, and lifestyle these two narrators could hardly be more different, they nevertheless share several traits. Dom Casmurro and Riobaldo are both:

- I. Narrator/protagonists.
- II. Aged and looking back at their lives.
- III. Self-conscious about the tales they tell.
- IV. Engaged with how their readers/listeners, whom they work on constantly, will respond.
- V. Anxious to elicit a certain response from their reader/listener.

These are the similarities that connect them and that make their comparative study possible. Yet differences abound, and these are what make each novel as unique and as powerful as it is.

I

The narrator of the novel *Dom Casmurro* is an elderly man known not by his real name,

Bento Santiago, but by his nickname, Dom Casmurro, the significance of which we are apprised in chapter I. In chapter II, we learn, from our narrator, more about the genesis of the book we are now reading: “Um dia, há bastantes anos, lembrou-me reproduzir no Engenho Novo a casa em que me criei na antiga Rua de Matacavalos, dando-lhe o mesmo

aspecto e economia daquela outra, que desapareceu” (Assis, *Dom Casmurro*, 807-808). Dom Casmurro will be his own protagonist, the main character in the story he himself tells.

We are then told why our narrator chose to write his book: “O meu fim evidente,” he declares, “era atar as duas pontas da vida, e restaurar na velhice a adolescência” (*Dom Casmurro*, 808). But, he also informs us, he failed; “Pois, senhor, não consegui recompor o que foi nem o que fui. . . ; um homem consola-se mais ou menos das pessoas que perde: mas falta eu mesmo, e esta lacuna é tudo” (*Dom Casmurro* 808). This rather enigmatic last bit is leavened by the narrator, who tells his reader she will understand what he means by reading on: “É o que vais entender, lendo” (*Dom Casmurro* 809).

Dom Casmurro, according to his version of events, was wronged in life. Little by little, he will try to convince his reader that he was cuckolded, that his dearly beloved wife and his best friend betrayed him. Throughout, he portrays himself as an innocent victim, one deserving of the reader’s sympathy. He is the main character in the story he tells. But, as Helen Caldwell asked in *The Brazilian Othello of Machado de Assis*, is he as innocent as he makes himself out to be? If he is, why, at the end of the novel, does the reader feel so uncomfortable about agreeing with his assessment of what happened to him? If he is not so innocent, what bothers us? What evidence do we have for questioning his insistence that he is the victim of an adulterous affair?

Great pain and suffering are inflicted in this novel, but who is the perpetrator? Who is responsible? Is it the wife, Capitu, as our narrator would have us believe, or is it the narrator himself, as a younger man? The reader is eventually called upon to render a decision on this question. Indeed, the entire plot turns on interpretation, on how the reader responds to the story the narrator/protagonist lays out for her.

Riobaldo is a retired *jagunço*, a gunman in the service of a Backlands leader. Riobaldo, too, knows what he has done in his life. And, like Dom Casmurro, Riobaldo is the main player in the story he tells. Yet there is a major difference here; in contrast to Dom Casmurro, Riobaldo has no ulterior motive for telling his tale. He wants only to

understand what the events of his life mean. Two questions above all preoccupy him: One, which has two parts, is this: does the Devil exist and did he once sell his soul to the Devil to get something he desperately wanted; and, two, what should he think about the intense love he felt for one of his fellow *jagunços*? The first question is less religious in nature than practical; in order to deal with the dangers and uncertainties of life, he wonders, don't we all sell our souls to navigate it? The second question engages the novel in the question of gender identity, which, in the 1950s, would have still been a truly fraught topic. Even more extraordinary, the narrator/protagonist's conclusion is not condemning but edifying: It makes no difference whom one loves, he concludes; love, a good thing, is love.

II

Dom Casmurro says at the outset that his goal is to tie together the two ends of his life, childhood and old age. While the reader is touched here by the nostalgia this very human desire evokes in her, by the end of the novel she feels depressed and deflated, overwhelmed by the narrator's baseness and meanness of spirit. How the reader is moved from this initially sympathetic response to the narrator to one of revulsion reveals the brilliance of the narrative itself.

The narrative line of *Dom Casmurro* features two main events: the question of Capitu's alleged adultery and the degeneration of the callow Bento (Bentinho) Santiago into the monstrous Dom Casmurro. The narration is pitched toward the first one. But if the reader accepts it, she enters into a most banal story. The second event, less obvious, smacks of tragedy. Its clues are the references to Othello that dot the narrative. The novel's title, moreover, points to its main character, Bento Santiago/Dom Casmurro; it does not point to Capitu, and this leads the alert reader to suspect that the narrative is really more about the person who writes it, Dom Casmurro, than it is about his wife, Capitu, whom he seeks to indict for adultery.

Also advanced in years, Riobaldo is, from the first sentence on, looking back on his life and trying to make sense of it. "De primeiro," he says, thinking back to when he was

young, “eu fazia e mexia, e pensar não pensava. Não possuía os prazos. Vivi puxando difícil de difícil, peixe vivo no moquém: quem mói no asp’ro, não fantasêia. Mas, agora,” he declares, taking advantage of how his new state of retirement gives him time to ponder all that happened to him, “feita a folga que me vem, e sem pequenos dessorseços, estou de range rede” (Rosa, *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, 26). “Minha velhice já principiou,” he affirms, “erreí de toda conta. E o reumatismo . . . Lá como que diz: nas escorvas. Ahã” (*Grande Sertão: Veredas* 32). Then, and emphasizing the orality of his tale, he adds “Hem? Hem?” (*Grande Sertão: Veredas* 32).

More honorable, Riobaldo’s desire to understand is above board and open to questioning throughout. At the end, the reader feels admiration for Riobaldo. She feels uplifted by his tale, which has a profound sense of wonder and grandeur to it. The reader feels she is part of the human experience and our struggle to understand – to understand our lives and the world around us. She feels she has become a greater, more complete human being by experiencing this book.

III

Because the narrators of both *Dom Casmurro* and *Grande Sertão: Veredas* speak directly to the reader (or, in the case of Rosa’s novel, to a listener, someone known only as “o senhor”), the question of trust looms large. Can we rely equally on what they tell us? The answer is no. Self-conscious in the extreme, both narrator/protagonists understand what they are doing and why. And both constantly manipulate the reader, expending vast amounts of time and energy trying to effect the desired response. But why they do this emerges as a major difference between them.

As the reader eventually discovers, or as she is given more and more opportunities to conclude, Dom Casmurro is unreliable because he has a very specific agenda, and he does not want the reader to be privy to it or to challenge it – until he is ready to deliver the *coup de grace*, as he does at the end. At that point, he demands his reader agree with him.

Every word that goes into the narrator's tale is his attempt to convince the reader of what Dom Casmurro believes, or needs to believe, is Capitu's guilt. Capitu, who is long dead when Dom Casmurro begins to narrate, never gets to speak on her own behalf. Even when, as a novelistic construction, she appears to have things to say, she is mouthing only what the narrator gives her to say. She never speaks for herself.

Riobaldo is also unreliable, but it is not a matter of any premeditated response he wants to extract from his reader; it is because he himself does not fully comprehend the meaning of the story he is telling, and he constantly reminds his interlocutor and the reader of this fact.

But as our storyteller, Riobaldo is yet again unreliable because he refuses to fully inform his listener/reader about what is going to happen, about why certain things happened the way they did, or about how his story will turn out. His goal is not to clarify or explain but to entice the reader, and to allow her and the "o senhor" figure to experience the unfolding of events as he did. As he is simultaneously talking (to "o senhor") and writing (for his reader), he knows everything that is going to happen, but he will not divulge this information before it is time. Tantalized by the telling of the tale, the reader, like the person to whom Riobaldo is talking, is pulled along by the ever increasing and irresistible force of the story.

Yet Riobaldo is also reliable because he is honest, and, as he keeps reminding the *senhor*/reader, he is only trying to understand. He hopes his listener can help him do this; what he does not say, but what is implied, is that he is asking the reader of his novel to do the very same thing, to understand, to understand not only what she is "hearing" (for *Grande Sertão: Veredas* is a very aural book) but what she is reading.

IV

Dom Casmurro frequently addresses his *leitor/leitora*, and claims, in every case, to be trying to tell them the truth. This appeal to veracity is one of his main narrative strategies. Sometimes he couches his purpose in a self-deprecatingly comic (but always

self-serving) mode. In chapter XLV, for example, he writes, “Abane a cabeça, leitor; faça todos os gestos de incredulidade. Chegue a deitar fora êste livro, se o tédio já o não obrigou a isso antes; . . . Mas, se o não fêz antes e só agora, fio que torne a pegar do livro e que o abra na mesma página, sem crer por isso na veracidade do autor. Todavia, não há nada mais exato” (*Dom Casmurro*, 856). Riobaldo is many things as a narrator, but funny is not one of them.

In adopting a humorous tone, Dom Casmurro seeks to ingratiate himself with his reader, who, in the end, will be asked to find Capitu guilty of adultery. At that point, the narrator/protagonist, whom we can now envision as the prosecutor in a criminal trial, will rest his case and the jury/reader will deliberate (that is, consider how she feels about Capitu, the accused, but also about Dom Casmurro, the accuser) before rendering a verdict. Though lacking in hard evidence, the case he mounts is nevertheless compelling, and its making, the reader finally realizes, constitutes the very narrative, *Dom Casmurro*, she has been reading. An attorney, and so skilled at marshalling his evidence and arguing his cases in front of a judge or jury, Dom Casmurro presents his story in a compelling manner. There is no defense attorney to speak for the person, Capitu, Dom Casmurro’s wife. Only the juror/reader can do that.

If the reader/juror finds for Dom Casmurro, then she is siding with the husband in what must rank as one of the world’s most boring stories of adultery; if she finds for the wife, however, she is saying she is not convinced by Dom Casmurro’s carefully crafted argument. This same reader might also point out that his charge against her rests entirely on resemblances, which, perhaps in a moment of what Derrida terms “aporia,” do occur in life, even between unrelated people. In chapter LXXXIII, the narrator himself admits this: “Na vida há dessas semelhanças assim esquisitas,” he allows, having just mistaken a portrait to be that of Capitu when she was not its subject at all (*Dom Casmurro*, 890). While this chapter’s importance to the overall structure of *Dom Casmurro* is not evident at the time, it becomes critically so in the novel’s concluding chapters, when Dom Casmurro makes his fatal, final decision about whose child Ezequiel is. For the reader who does not give Dom Casmurro the interpretation he demands, she, regardless of what Capitu may or may

not have done (and this is far from certain), realizes that the real crime here is what Dom Casmurro does to himself and, even worse, to the people around him. It is at this point that *Dom Casmurro* takes on its tragic sensibility. Majestic and elevating, *Grande Sertão: Veredas* is not tragic.

The most glaring example of Bento's moral collapse is his attempt to kill the boy, Ezequiel, by poisoning him. Whether the offspring of Bento Santiago and Capitu or (as the narrator insists) Escobar and Capitu, the lad is entirely innocent of any wrong doing. He is guilty of nothing. And, indeed, to the end of his days, he shows nothing but love for Bento, the man he knows as his father. That in chapter CXXXVII Bento Santiago urged little Ezequiel to drink the poisoned coffee is far worse than any adultery that Capitu might have engaged in. Try though he does, Bento cannot dismiss his action as a meaningless gesture, a sign of how upset he was at the wrong he felt had been done him. The guilty party, the reader/juror might well conclude, is really the monstrous creature, Dom Casmurro, Bento Santiago has morphed into. Adulterer or not, at no point in *Dom Casmurro* does Capitu try and murder an innocent little boy.

This interpretive approach is reinforced in chapter CXLV, when we learn that Ezequiel, now a grown man, dies of typhoid fever on a trip to the Holy Land. Instead of grieving, as any decent human being would, the now morally perverted Bento Santiago declares that, rather than having given him the money to make his trip (which he did), he, Bento, would rather have given him leprosy: "Prometi-lhe recursos. . . ; antes lhe pegasse a lepra . . ." (*Dom Casmurro* 941). This same twisted narrator then declares, with even greater callousness, "pagaria o triplo para não tornar a vê-lo" (*Dom Casmurro* 941). Even if Ezequiel is not the flesh and blood of Bento, to say of the boy that you would rather have given him leprosy than pay for his studies and that you would have gladly paid triple that sum never to see him again, is utterly unjustified; it is a ghastly, inhuman thing to say and believe, as he does.

Why would Machado have included these two devastating bits of information if he did not want his reader to question Dom Casmurro's claim that he is the innocent victim here? Even if the reader accepts the narrator's demurring that the first episode, that of the

poisoning, was comic at heart and a sign of his commitment to telling the truth (a reading that seems dubious at best), the second one is sheer cruelty. And its impact on the reader is not in any way diluted, diminished, or otherwise mitigated. It stands as exactly what it is: an unvarnished expression of malevolence. What the narrator declares here, close to the end, shows his complete and utter degeneration as a human being.

Dom Casmurro wants affirmation from the reader for the determinations and actions he has made in his life. This is why interpretation stands at the core of the novel. This is true of literature, of course, but it is also true of life, which is similarly full of ambiguous signs. In literature, as in life, decisions must be made, and often on the basis of imperfect or erroneous information.

Interpretation is also what juries do. And psychiatrists.

With respect to the latter, the reader of *Dom Casmurro* could conclude that its narrator/protagonist, Dom Casmurro, might be seeking to expiate the gnawing guilt he might now feel over having made terrible mistakes in judgement (interpretation) in his earlier life and so caused the suffering and ruin of several innocent people. He cannot change what he did, but neither can he stand living with the terrible burden his possible culpability engenders in him. Read (interpreted) from this perspective, Dom Casmurro could be imploring the reader to agree with his carefully orchestrated presentation of the facts, to reassure him, in essence, that he was right to do the things he did. This approach would explain why comments on the art of narration are so key to the text, becoming, finally, one of its main motifs; how one tells, or structures, the story can be more important than the story itself, and especially so if the person telling or writing the story seeks to extract a particular response from his listener or reader. In this sense, *Dom Casmurro* comes off as being more about writing and reading than about adultery.

The brilliance of *Dom Casmurro* as a text, or *texte* (as Barthes understood it) is that it contains in itself clues that, if followed, could lead the reader to a conclusion very different from the one the narrator/protagonist desires. These clues are there, and not in short supply. Read in this fashion, *Dom Casmurro* reveals itself to be, in 1899, the epitome

of what, in *S/Z* (1970), Barthes terms the *scriptible* text, the one whose function it is “de faire du lecteur, non plus un consommateur, mais un producteur du texte” (Barthes 10). In *Dom Casmurro*, the passive reader, the one who likes to “consume” books and who accepts whatever the author tells her, will side with the narrator/protagonist, Dom Casmurro; the active, engaged reader, the kind Machado prized and cultivated, becomes the “producer” of the text and its multiple possible meanings.

Riobaldo, as already noted, has a mysterious figure, “o senhor,” who listens to his tale. Though the reader never hears him speak, Riobaldo’s narration suggests that, from time to time, he does. As a narrative tactic, this allows Riobaldo to insert a related matter, to assert his veracity, or to go off on a tangent the relevance of which, as with Faulkner, only becomes apparent much later. At about the midway point in this huge, sprawling narrative, and after having told his listener a great deal but not all, he asks, as if in response to a query about this very question, “Só sim? Ah, meu senhor, mas o que eu acho é que o senhor já sabe mesmo tudo – que tudo lhe fiei. Aqui eu podia pôr ponto” (*Grande Sertão: Veredas*, 324). But, of course, he does not end his story here; he goes on.

“Para tirar o final,” he says, “para conhecer o resto que falta, o que lhe basta, que menos mais, é pôr atenção no que contei, remexer vivo o que vim dizendo. Porque não narrei nada à-tôa . . . Não desperdiço palavras” (*Grande Sertão: Veredas* 325). Although he is speaking directly to his visitor, Riobaldo is also addressing his reader. “O senhor pense, o senhor ache. O senhor ponha enredo” (325). Has better advice ever been given to a reader? Read carefully. Think carefully. Mull it over, he tells us. Then imbue what you’re responding to with meaning. Don’t be passive, not in reading this narrative and not in living your life, which, the *Grande Sertão*, is what this great novel is really about.

V

In the final chapter of *Dom Casmurro*, the narrator/protagonist demands the response he wants from his reader. He wants, ostensibly, to know if the (for him!) deceiving, adulterous Capitu of the later years was already there in the young girl next door at his childhood home, or if something external to her happened to change her. But by

this time the reader knows this is not an honest question; Dom Casmurro already has the answer he wants. In posing this pseudo-question as he does, he puts the onus on his reader, not himself. Mentioning the fits of jealousy that had plagued him, possibly as a way of gaining the reader's sympathy, the narrator employs Scripture to close his case. To reject or even question his argument is, at this final juncture, to reject the words of the Holy Bible: "Jesus, filho de Sirach," he says, "se soubesse dos meus primeiros ciúmes, dir-me-ia, como no seu cap. IX, vers. 1: 'Não tenhas ciúmes de tua mulher para que ela não se mêta a enganar-te com a malícia que aprender de ti'" (*Dom Casmurro*, 942).

"Mas," he then avers, with cold and absolute finality, "eu creio que não, e tu concordarás comigo; se te lembras bem da Capitu menina, has de reconhecer que uma estava dentro da outra, como a fruta dentro da casca" (*Dom Casmurro* 942). The fault, in other words, lies with her, Capitu, not him. And, as stated in the most explicit manner possible, he expects his reader to agree with him. Case closed.

For the engaged reader, Dom Casmurro's motivation for telling his story is darker and more tangled than he wants to let on. He knows what he has done and, perhaps feeling the pangs of guilt or at least doubtful at this point about his decisions, he seems to need now to be reassured that he was correct. Because if he was not, if he was wrong in his interpretations, he committed a series of heinous crimes against innocent people, Capitu, Escobar, and Ezequiel. Unstated, this is the unsettling possibility that slowly mounts, in the mind of the open-minded reader, even as the text (which is Dom Casmurro's narration) systematically builds its case against Capitu.

Riobaldo, too, withholds crucial information from his reader until the very end. It is not until the concluding pages that he discloses, to his listener and to his reader, what he had known all along but what he had withheld until now: "E disse. Eu conheci! Como em todo o tempo antes eu não contei ao senhor – e mercê peço – mas para o senhor divulgar comigo, a par, justo o travo de tanto segredo, sabendo somente no átimo em que eu também só soube. . . Que Diadorim era o corpo de uma mulher, moça perfeita. . . ." (*Grande Sertão: Veredas*, 615).

Astonished, as is the reader (and, presumably, the listener), Riobaldo then adds, “O senhor não repare. Demore, que eu conto. A vida da gente nunca tem termo real” (*Grande Sertão: Veredas* 615). The reader, struck by this line, realizes why it is true; because as long as we have language to talk about it and impart meaning to it, life never ends. It goes on forever. The novel’s final element, the sign for infinity, leaves us with this very thought.

Life will go on at the end of *Dom Casmurro*, too, and, again, it will be because language continues on, but whereas for Dom Casmurro language has been defiled and used to deceive, for the reader of *Grande Sertão: Veredas*, it emerges as the stuff of life itself. It is language that makes us who and what we are, and it is language that allows us to contemplate what it all means. If science can tell us if we are biologically alive or dead, it is language that allows us to construct an identity and to consider how and why we claim to know things.

In contrast to Dom Casmurro, Riobaldo seeks not affirmation of questionable past decisions and deeds but answers to his questions, which, as much as they are about his life, are also about the nature of human existence. Neither does he seek to expiate guilt; he wants simply to understand. This is his quest, and there is greatness to it. And honor. The reader, having read (and, in a sense, listened to) Riobaldo’s story and trying, along with him, to make sense of it all, feels uplifted by the experience. She feels she has touched the truth of life, and that her *travessia*, her life and her quest to understand, is worthy, too.

Dom Casmurro is not on a quest, not to understand, not to tell the truth, and not to take responsibility for his actions; his perspective is pinched and narrowly personal. He is consumed by selfishness, and it diminishes him as a human being. He emerges, finally, as an ogre, and, at the decisive moment, the reader recoils in horror from him. As he himself suggests, Dom Casmurro wants to present himself as the noble Othello. But what he does not tell us, and what the reader must discover on her own, is that he is also his own Iago, as his very name, Bento SantiAGO, shows (capitalization mine). There is tragedy in his self-destruction, in the transformation of the callow Bento Santiago into the monster that is Dom Casmurro, but there is no catharsis for the reader, who feels sullied by being

asked to agree with him – and, swayed by the story he tells, by being sorely tempted to do so.

Rosa and Riobaldo employ the same tactic with the motif-like work, “reDEMOinho” (capitalization again mine), with *demo* serving as another word for the Devil, who, in ways that echo Goethe’s *Faust* (1808), plays a major role in this novel (*Grande Sertão: Veredas* 437). As in the case of the name, Bento Santiago, which implies that the “blessed” Bento carries within himself the seeds of his own destruction (the Iago portion of his being), so, too, does Rosa imply that in the heart of the indecipherable whirlwind that is life resides the Devil, “o demo,” who exists to torment us (*Grande Sertão: Veredas* 437).

The decisive element these two great novels have in common is the importance of interpretation, in reading literature, of course, but also in real life. As readers but also as human beings we try to decipher the welter of signs that envelop us. It is this intensely human desire to know and understand that Machado and Rosa build their novels around. Universal in nature, it is the fount of their extraordinary power, even now, decades after their initial appearances.

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