Faulty Stars and "Demonic Innocence":

A Semi-Short Commentary on
"The Disasters of Sofia"
by Clarice Lispector

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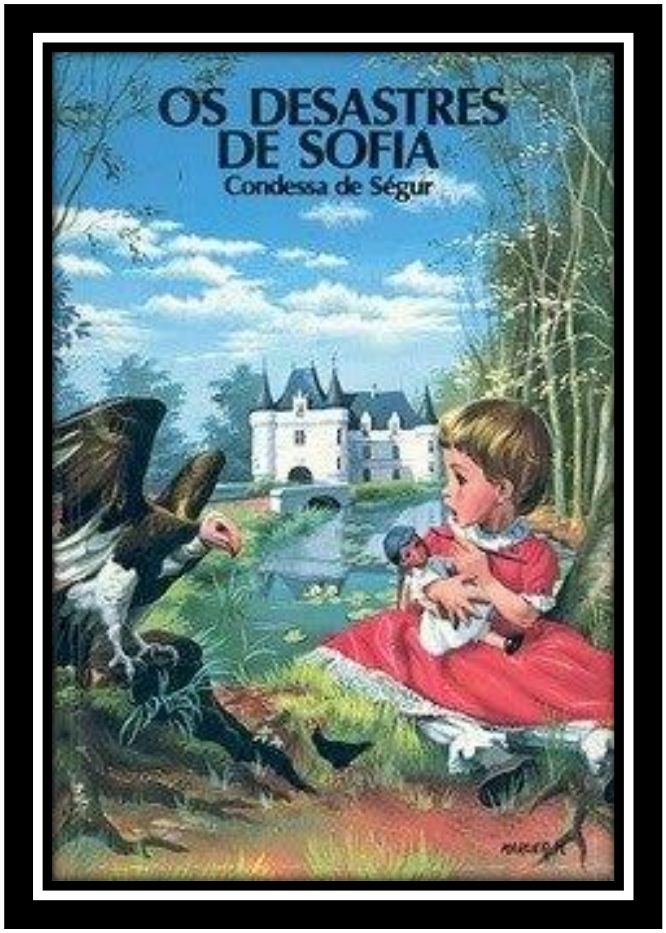


"The Disasters of Sofia" ["Os desastres de Sofia"] is an unusual short story by Clarice Lispector, a Ukrainian-Brazilian post-modern writer, first published in *The Foreign Legion* [*A legião estangeira*] in 1964. If you're not familiar with Lispector's work, "The Disasters of Sophie" is a good introduction to the high strangeness of her style of writing and theological ideas.

The story is strongly autobiographical. The first-person narrator, Sofia, is a young schoolgirl who is representative of Lispector herself. The plot of the story is non-linear, but relatively simple: as a young girl, Sofia torments her teacher. One day, the teacher gives them an assignment: to write in their own words the story of a man who dreams of finding a treasure and he travels around the world searching for a treasure without luck. He returns home and begins farming, thus finally becoming a wealthy man. In her retelling of the story, the narrator suggests that the moral of the story is that hidden treasures can be found where they are least expected, such as in one's own "dirty backyard." Or "something" like that, anyway. Finding themselves one-on-one, the teacher does not upbraid the narrator, as she

is hoping, but rather remarks that she is "a very funny girl." Sofia runs away into the forest, and the story ends with a meditation on God, creation, and storytelling.

There has already been quite a lot written about this dense short story. It contains elements and themes that can often be found in Lispector's writing: a dirty girl who is at once innocent and sexualized (as in *The Hour of the Star* [*A Hora da Estrela*]); a heavily symbolic and esoteric religiosity; a struggle with the (mystical) power of the word and story-telling. These elements will appear in this reading of the story, but they are not the focus. Rather, I wish to draw attention to two elements of the story that seem to go relatively overlooked: its retelling of the Fall and the troubling sexual dimensions of the narrator's relationship with her teacher. Before analyzing either of these elements, however, it is worth taking note of the title of the story: "The Disasters of Sofia."

For a story that relies heavily on Jewish and Christian theology and symbolism, with a healthy dash of Gnosticism for good measure, the title of the story alludes to a Greco-Roman cosmology. The word *disaster* comes from the French *désastre*, or "ill-starred." In the Greco-Roman worldview, one's fate was unchangeable and literally written in the stars. This is what is meant by "ill-starred" or, as in the case of Romeo and Juliet "star-crossed"—doomed. Hence, *disaster* means "a misfortune." The name Sofia itself comes from the Greek *sophía*, meaning "wisdom." Seen from this perspective, the name itself is an allusion to the retelling of the Fall from the Garden of Eden that runs through the story—it is suggested throughout the story that Eve was destined to eat from the Tree of Knowledge and be expelled from Eden. Thus, we see the name suggests that Sofia-as-Eve is destined for wisdom and, ultimately, exile.

It is also likely that the title is also in reference to French morality tales *Les Maleurs de Sophie* by the Comptesse de Ségur (1858), which is translated as *Os desastres de Sofia* in Portuguese. In it, the (insipid) eponymous Sophie learns various lessons about how to be properly bourgeoise by being corrected for her errors by authority figures, such as her mother and nanny. She is ultimately always grateful for her correction. In "The Disasters of Sofia," although Sofia wants to be corrected for her deviations from the conventional bourgeois life, the teacher ultimately refuses to act as an authority in this way.

It is in writing about her agitation and defiance of her teacher that the narrator first alludes to herself as Eve. She says:

> … I sensed that my role was evil and dangerous; it impelled in me a voraciousness for a late-coming real life, and worse than unfit, I also enjoyed tearing his pockets. Only God could forgive what I was, because He alone knew of what I was made and why. So, I let myself be

> His matter. Being God's matter was my only grace. And the source of a nascent mysticism. Not mysticism for Him, but for His matter, for a raw and pleasure-filled life: I was a worshipper.[1]

I realize this is a long quote, but it's worth observing here in detail. Like Eve, Sofia feels driven to ruin because of a desire for "real life." The theology she is expressing here is complex, and perhaps unsettled, but she evinces a kind of Gnosticism. She declares that she is only bound to God insofar as she is made of His matter. Rather, she worships the "raw and pleasure-filled life" that He provided. Essentially, it is a declaration of freedom from God, a statement of a morally ambiguous hedonism. Despite her insistence on her own independence, however, Sofia is still tied to her fate, which she believes is God's will, and only He understands why she is the way she is.

The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man by Rubens and Brueghel the Elder (circa 1615)

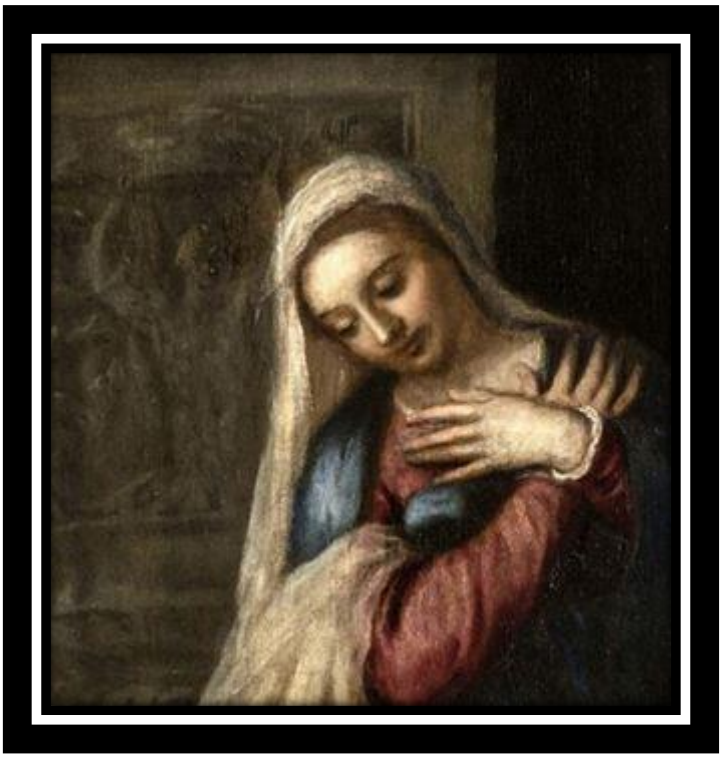
The other elements of the story of the Fall are deftly established. Sofia describes the teacher she torments and tempts as "her king of Creation"—he is the Adam to her Eve (more on this in a second). She notes that she "had been born full of errors in need of correction," an allusion to the Catholic doctrine of original sin. The recreation yard of the school is

[1] All translations of "The Disasters of Sofia" quoted in this text are my own. For support where necessary, I relied on Giovanni Pontiero's 1986 translation.

described as a kind of Eden: "It was as beautiful to me as it would be to a squirrel or a horse. There were trees scattered about, long slopes and hills and an extensive lawn."

At the climax of the story, the moment of revelation, Sofia finds herself face-to-face with her teacher. They both see each other fully. (He even takes off his glasses.) She realizes for the first time the fallibility of adults. He realizes for the first time that she is a "funny girl." Much like Adam and Eve feeling ashamed at realizing their nakedness in the Garden of Eden after eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, Sofia and the teacher both feel shame following this revelation. The text is explicit on this point: "It was the first true shame of my life."

Afterwards, Sofia attempts to return to the Garden of Eden/schoolyard, only to find herself with her hand on her chest, transformed into the image of a "virgin at the annunciation." The Annunciation of the Virgin Mary is the moment when the Archangel Gabriel tells her she is pregnant with Jesus. The Virgin Mary in these scene is often shown with her hand on her chest, a sign of greeting and openness to Gabriel's message.



Detail from *The Annunciation* by Titian (circa 1560)

What follows is another expression of a sort of Gnostic mystical interpretation of the Fall:

> Like a virgin at an annunciation, yes. For allowing me to make him smile at last, for this he annunciated me. He had just transformed me into more than the King of Creation: he had made me the wife of Creation.

After her exile from Eden, she is no longer Eve, and she has overtaken Adam/her teacher as well ("King of Creation"). She has become the Virgin Mary, "mother of Creation", or the Mother of Jesus, the embodiment of God on Earth. The evocation of a virginal figure here, a Catholic one no less, raises questions about the nature of the revelation between Sofia and her teacher.

Before I pursue my reading of this relationship more generally and the revelation scene in particular, I think it will be useful to first understand a typical, notably authoritative reading of their relationship. Benjamin Moser has (controversially) overseen the translation of many recent translations of Lispector's work into English and wrote the English-language biography of Lispector *Why This World* (2009). This biography has been accused of containing fabrications and of cribbing the work of Lusophone researcher Nádia Gotlib. However, I think what Moser has to say about "The Disasters of Sofia" is useful to us for two reasons. First, it illuminates elements of this heavily autobiographical story. Second, it is exemplary of the way many readings of the tale gloss over or elide the explicitly sexual overtones of the story's language.

Moser reports that in the third grade, Lispector was sent to the Colégio Hebreo-Idisch-Brasileiro (Hebrew-Yiddish-Brazilian Middle School). There, she was said to have argued regularly with the Hebrew teacher, Moysés Lazar. Moser notes, "Lazar may have been the model for a recurrent figure in Clarice's writing: the old teacher, alternatively exasperated and fascinated by a precocious girl." (The word "precocious" there is interesting.) Moser goes on to describe "The Disasters of Sofia" as one example of this recurring teacher-figure:

> … the story of a wild, brilliant nine-year-old girl who torments a teacher she both loves and despises … The professor has been changed by her story of "the hidden treasure," "the treasure that is hidden where it is least expected." Her fear of the teacher strips away his human layers—his glasses are an example—and to her horror she sees what they both are, "anonymous as a belly opened for an intestinal operation," what she called the "wild heart" of life.[2]

While Moser says Sofia "loves" the teacher, he does not note how the teacher acts towards her. The story is treated as a sort of gentle morality tale: the innocent young girl teaches the crusty old professor how to see the world in a new light and in turn she loses her innocence and sees he is just a human like any other, raw and sensitive. Ultimately, the teacher, in failing to discipline her for her precociousness, sets her free to act with wisdom in the world of adults, to write stories that comment on the reality of things. This is one way to read the

[2] Benjamin Moser, *Why This World: A Biography of Clarice Lispector*, New York, Oxford UP, 2009, p. 65-66.

story, but I suggest the nature of Sofia's revelation may not *only* be the recognition of the inverted moral she gives to her teacher's parable.

At the very beginning of the story, Sofia says she is drawn to the teacher, though it is "not love." A paragraph later, however, she admits that "I loved him in a certain sense." She says that at night he would "irritate" her, and she would lay awake thinking about him. She says, "I was barely nine years old, an age hard like the unbroken stem of a begonia." (Begonias later appear as flowers the children eat in the recreation area of the school.) The language describing herself as an unmolested flower would seem to allude to a vision of a virgin who has not lost her "flower."

Despite her youth and virginity, Sofia persists in pursuing and "tricking" her teacher, in a chase that is described in language analogous to Eve's seduction of Adam into eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Sofia attempts to seduce her teacher by simply looking at him, and it appears she is successful enough to make him constantly stutter when he looks at her.

> It was a look that I made very transparent and angelic, very open, like that of innocence itself witnessing a crime. And it achieved the same result every time: irritated, he avoided my eyes and started to stutter.

She goes so far as to describe the final words of her inverted morality tale as written with a "growing coquettishness." The effect is a bit as if Lolita was written from the point of view of Lolita herself.

In the scene of the revelation, Sofia and the teacher are alone in the room together for the first time. As a reminder, she is nine years old in this scene. She is completely terrified of him. Her heart is pounding, and she is pressing herself up against the wall as hard as she can. She repeats that her "heart was dying of thirst." The teacher tells her to come closer and asks her about the nature of the treasure as she describes it in her telling of the story. She begs her teacher:

> … that my punishment should be simply to suffer forever from guilt, that eternal torture would be my punishment, anything but this unknown life.

In this moment, rather than castigating her, the teacher looks at her more closely, and the text at this point becomes metaphysical. The narrator repeats several times that she is not able to describe what she felt and saw in that moment, simply that she saw "the world's abyss." The following scene is hallucinatory: she describes herself as inside of an eye and says her teacher's eyelashes looked like cockroaches. She says of her teacher that:

> I saw his extreme apprehension about not making mistakes, his slow student's application, his clumsiness as if he had suddenly become left-handed. Without understanding it, I knew that I was asked to receive his delivery and his open belly, and that I receive his man's weight.

Alone with him in the classroom, she is being "asked to receive his delivery … his man's weight," although she does not fully understand what she is being asked to do. (It is worth noting that the original word in the text is *entrega*, which can mean both "delivery" and "surrender.") Sofia is terrified and dissociates—rather than looking upon the scene at what is happening around her, she becomes the eye itself. Later, she notes that not only is she unable to find the words to describe the event, but she feels compelled to never speak of it in order to protect the happiness of others, such as her father, who she describes as "less prepared than she."

After the event in the classroom, Sofia finds herself in a disenchanted world. She once thought that adulthood would bring with it a freedom from the "dirty soul of a girl." Instead, she realizes that her teacher had "destroyed" that idea, and along with it "destroyed my love for him and for myself." Her salvation was "impossible." Later, from the depths of the forest, she decides she pities her teacher for having fallen for her "tricks," led by her "diabolical innocence."

It is hard for me to read this passage of the story and the later denouement without considering how much it seems to suggest some sort of sexual contact between Sofia and her teacher. It wouldn't be the first time Lispector has alluded to pedophilia—it is a theme that appears in many of her stories about young girls, notably in *The Hour of the Star*. Sofia in the beginning of the text literally describes herself as a "prostitute" and the teacher as a "saint."

After the revelatory scene, Sofia goes from innocent to wise, from residing in the garden to living in exile, from prostitute to an inverted Virgin Mary. The notion of a "diabolical" inversion is a common feature of Catholic ideas of Satanism and corruption.[3] The transformation of Sofia is catalyzed when in retelling her teacher's parable she takes the assumed moral, that it is better to work than search for gold, and inverts it, stating that that best treasure is hidden in dirty backyards. This Satanic inversion is echoed in her final transformation of the story: because of her (possible) violation, she becomes a kind of diabolic Virgin Mary. Mary became sainted because of her *lack* of penetration; Sofia is to be sainted *because* of her penetration.

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[3] See, for example, Jules Michelet's discussion of the Black Sabbath in *La Sorcière* (trans: *Satanism and Witchcraft*), 1862.

The text is ambiguous as to whether there was physical contact between Sofia and her teacher. That is to say, it could be literal or figurative penetration that occurred. It is possible that the teacher simply intimated he perceived Sofia as an object of sexual desire rather than as a young girl. Regardless of the specifics, it is clear Sofia experiences not only a creative or spiritual revelation, but a sexual one as well, one that has implications even darker than those of the more explicit discoveries.

The Annunciation by Eustache le Sueur (circa 1650)

I do not wish to disparage the memory of Moysés Lazar, Lispector's teacher at the Hebrew School who Moser says is the inspiration for this figure. We have no way of knowing whether Lazar was in fact the model for this character.[4] Rather, I noted the possible real-life inspirations for the story as being the Hebrew School for another reason entirely.

[4] While there is no evidence to my knowledge that Lazar had an inappropriate relationship with Lispector, it is interesting that Lispector's sister recounted in an interview that she had no

After her revelation as to the true nature of the world, Sofia transforms from an Old Testament figure, Eve, into a New Testament figure, the Virgin Mary. If we take the setting of the Hebrew School to be accurate, it suggests a theological shift in Lispector herself: away from Judaism and towards a form of self-directed Catholic mysticism. (As Moser notes, her enduring interest in the work of Spinoza supports this interpretation.) This shift from Old to New Testament and the overall structure of the story has echoes of Philip Roth's "The Conversion of the Jews" (1959), where the autobiographical protagonist Ozzie badgers the rabbi into admitting that the Immaculate Conception was possible through the will of God. In the end, it comes out that Ozzie's protest was inspired in part by his mother and the rabbi beating him for asking questions about God.

Could Lispector/Sofia's shift away from the Jewish community towards a heretical solitary wandering similarly have been precipitated by some form of violence that she is unable to describe? Was the revelation scene merely the flash of understanding of the abyss prompted by her teacher's comment that she was "a funny girl" or something darker? Does Lispector mention the young Sofia's sexual interests as a mark of her natural curiosity or as an example of her internal narrative of how she understands the terrible things happening to her? Was the fruit of knowledge in this retelling of the Fall the (anti-)power of stories or taboo sexual contact? Despite its density, "The Disasters of Sofia" refrains from answering these questions directly, preferring instead to let the reader make their own inferences. In the end, Lispector withdraws from the page entirely as she is wont to do, expertly and definitively, abandoning you to make sense of it all on your own.

idea that Lazar had made such an impression on young Clarice. Could this be an echo of Sofia's statement she would not tell her father or anyone else in the family about the teacher's actions?