

Love: Nausea and the Indigestible Truth

Venu.

Some of you might remember, when Prof Hannah asked us what we would write about in a poem about the new year, I said I would write about me vomiting on New Year's Eve. I guess it comes to no surprise, that I was most intrigued by the recurring gustatory image of Nausea in Clarice Lispector's *Amor*.

Love: Nausea and the Indigestible Truth

Nausea:

- A Physical Sensation
- A Psychological Discomfort
- A Existential Dread

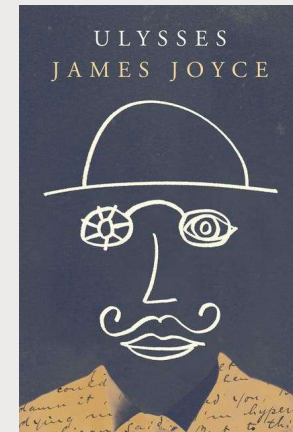
Nausea and the Stream of Consciousness: How does the style allows us to experience Ana's discomfort during her epiphany?

Nausea and Mid-Century Existentialism: What is the significance of this nausea?

So today, I want to explore Nausea in Amor – not just as a physical sensation, but as a psychological discomfort, as an existential dread. We will see, how nausea is woven into the very structure of the story, through its Stream of Consciousness narrative style, and how it connects to mid-century Existentialist thought.

Stream of Consciousness

- Stream of Consciousness is a narrative style that tries to replicate the chaotic, unfiltered flow of inner human thought and emotion.
 - Associated with the early 20th-century Modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf and James Joyce
- It is characterised by
 - Interior monologue
 - Non-linearity, jumps between times and thoughts
 - Unconventional punctuation and sentence structures
 - Subjective descriptions of the world



Lispector doesn't just describe Ana's nausea – she immerses us in it through the disorienting style of stream of consciousness. It is a narrative style that tries to replicate the chaotic inner state of human thought and emotion.

Stream of Consciousness as a narrative mode became popular in the 20th century, and is often associated with Modernist writers such as Virginia Woolf, and James Joyce. Some of you might have heard of the famously experimental *Ulysses*, I'll show you guys an excerpt in the next slide. Modernism emerged during this period of rapid industrialisation and urbanisation. People were growing disillusioned after world war 1, and Artists and writers sought new ways to express the unstable nature of their times, rejecting traditional storytelling in favour of more experimental expression.

It has a few common characteristics. This is by no means an exhaustive list.

For example, inner monologue. While we don't see too much of this in *Amor*, you might notice a distinctive lack of dialogue, until the very end. Most of the story exists within Ana's mind

Non-linearity, jumps between not only time, but also lines of thoughts. This reflects Ana's unstable inner state.

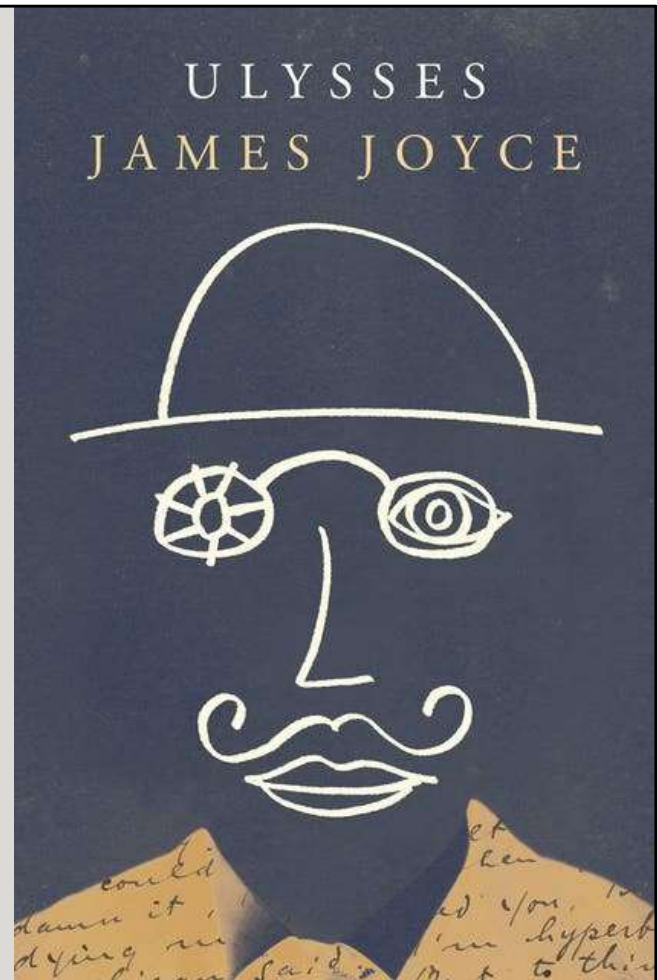
Unconventional punctuation and long running sentence structures are also a commonplace in this style. Here long, winding sentences portray the messy, looping nature of Ana's thought.

Lastly, descriptions tend to be limited from the perspective of the protagonist. Everything we read is almost as though filtered through Ana's perception, making the narration intensely personal and distorted.

Let's see this in action.

An Excerpts from Ulysses

Her antiquity in preceding and surviving succeeding tellurian generations: her nocturnal predominance: her satellitic dependence: her luminary reflection: her constancy under all her phases, rising and setting by her appointed times, waxing and waning: the forced invariability of her aspect: her indeterminate response to inaffirmative interrogation: her potency over effluent and refluxent waters: her power to enamour, to mortify, to invest with beauty, to render insane, to incite to and aid delinquency: the tranquil inscrutability of her visage: the terribility of her isolated dominant resplendent propinquity: her omens of tempest and of calm: the stimulation of her light, her motion and her presence: the admonition of her craters, her arid seas, her silence: her splendour, when visible: her attraction, when invisible. (Joyce 1155)



This is just one excerpt from Ulysses, where one character is trying to describe the beauty of another. Just to illustrate a particularly extreme example of Stream of Consciousness. I think it's quite funny actually.

Some things to note are that the whole thing is just 1 sentence. The weird use of the colon as well as the jumps across various antonyms. I won't linger here too long, but definitely come find me after if you would like to see this excerpt more closely!

Nausea and the Stream of Consciousness

- Diction in the first paragraph already establishes a sense of unease
 - “*trying to get comfortable*” (115)
 - “*half-contented sigh*” (115)
- The repetition of the phrase “blind man chewing gum”
 - Mirrors Ana’s fixation and confusion with her encounter
- The multi-sensory jumps at the garden create a disorientation
 - “*In the trees the fruits were black, sweet like honey. On the ground were dried pits full of circumvolutions, like little rotting brains. The bench was stained with purple juices. With intense gentleness the waters murmured. Clinging to the tree trunk were the luxuriant limbs of a spider.*” (121)

From the very beginning, the diction Lispector uses characterises the inner state of Ana. She describes Ana “trying to get comfortable”, describes her heaving a “half-contented sigh”. She draws attention to Ana’s inner unease.

Later in the story, after Ana encounters the blind man, the phrase “blind man chewing gum” is repeated in various capacities throughout the story. Initially, the constant repetition mirrors Ana’s fixation with the man, and the lack of any explanation leaves us, the readers, in the same confusion that Ana is experiencing. Over the story, the usage of the phrase decreases in frequency, perhaps mirroring Ana moving on from the encounter.

When Ana is at the garden, the descriptions jump across various items, and different senses are evoked. It creates

a sense of disorientation, of sensory overload, pulling the reader into Ana's disoriented, nauseating experience.

Nausea and the Stream of Consciousness

- Third-person limited perspective creates a sense of dissociation.
 - “*She let herself fall into a chair, her fingers still gripping the mesh sack.*” (123)

The use of the third-person perspective also creates a sense of separation between herself and what she is experiencing, like a sense of dissociation. Consider this line. She did not “fall into a chair”, she “*let herself* fall into a chair.”, *she* was not “gripping the mesh sack”, it was her “*fingers*”. There is a separation, a displacement of Ana from her own body, as if everything she experiences has an uncanny delay. This heightens the sense of discomfort that permeates the story.

It is clear that Lispector’s stream of consciousness immerses us in Ana’s nausea and discomfort -- but what does this mean?

*She had pacified life so well, taken such care for it not to explode. She had kept it all in serene comprehension, separated each person from the rest, clothes were clearly made to be worn and you could choose the evening movie from the newspaper — everything wrought in such a way that one day followed another. And a blind man chewing gum was shattering it all to pieces. And through this compassion there appeared to Ana a life full of **sweet nausea**, rising to her mouth. (119)*

Perhaps a clue would be the few occurrences of the word Nausea directly in the text. The first time it appears, Lispector uses the oxymoronic “sweet nausea” to describe the confusion Ana felt upon encountering the blind man.

Like the revulsion that precedes a surrender — it was fascinating, the woman was nauseated, and it was fascinating. (121)

Beneath her feet the earth was soft, Ana inhaled it with delight. It was fascinating, and she felt nauseated. (122)

Later, twice, she describes the nausea alongside a positive description of fascination. Why is it that there is such a positive association to this nausea. Why is sweet? Why is it fascinating? Why is it something that accompanies her love?

One lens through which we can understand the Ana's nausea that the blind man and garden seem to bring to the surface, is mid-century existentialist thought. This was contemporary philosophy at the time of Lispector writing *Amor*.

Mid-Century Existentialist Philosophers



Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus, three prominent philosopher at the time, all explored the unsettling nature of existence - the feeling that the world is too much, too arbitrary when seen without any illusions.

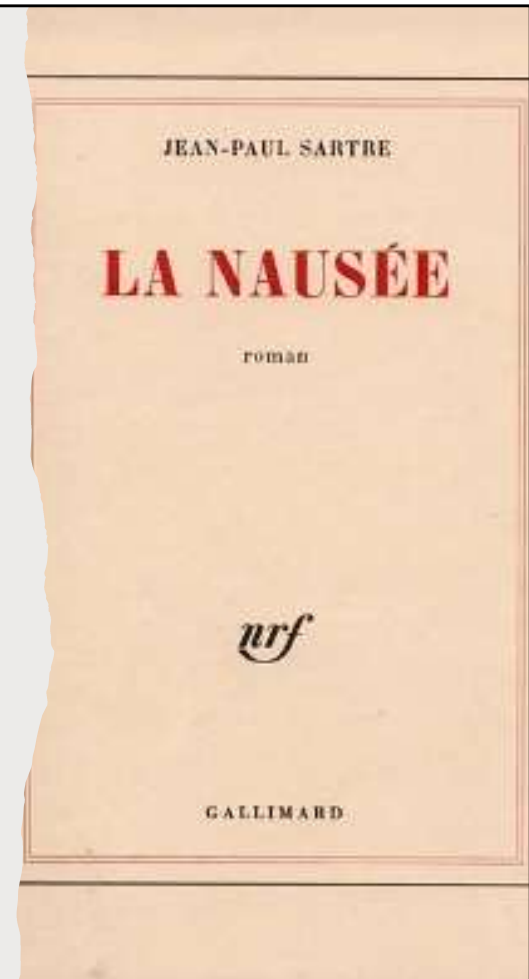


Nausea by Jean-Paul Sartre

“Nausea is written in the form of a diary that narrates the recurring feelings of revulsion that overcome Roquentin, a young historian, as he comes to realize the banality and emptiness of existence.” (Britannica)



Nausea as the realisation that everything exists without purpose or meaning.



Conveniently, Jean-Paul Sartre's first novel, published in 1938, was titled Nausea.

Jean-Paul Sartre's novel Nausea follows Antoine Roquentin, a solitary historian who gradually experiences a profound existential crisis. He begins to feel an overwhelming sense of nausea—not just physical, but a more philosophical disgust with existence itself.

At first, his life seems normal. He is working on a biography and wandering through a town. But slowly, ordinary objects, people, and even his own body begin to feel disturbingly excessive, meaningless, and almost repulsive. A famous image from Sartre's Nausea is that of the main character coming across a Chestnut tree root. In this famous scene, Roquentin finds it unbearable to look at. Its sheer existence, its physicality, is strange, is

nauseating. He realises that everything in the world simply exists, without purpose or meaning. This realization unsettles him to the point of existential horror.

The nausea, simply put, is this painful awareness that things simply *are* - they have no grand purpose or justification -they just exist. People comfort themselves, ground themselves with social roles, habits, and routines, merely pretending life has inherent meaning.

Ana's Existential Nausea

- Ana's routine gave her a sense of meaning of stability.
 - *“Deep down, Ana had always needed something to feel the firm root of things. And this was what a home bewilderingly had given her... That was what she wanted and chosen”* (116)
- The blind man disrupts this illusion
 - The compassion, love, she feels for the blind man breaks the illusion that she truly loves her family.
- The Garden
 - Ana's attention wanders across the garden – for the first time she truly sees the world.
 - *“secret labour”* (121)

Like Roquentin's experience with the tree root in Sartre's Nausea, Ana's moment with the blind man and the Garden shatters her perception of reality.

Ana's routine gave her a sense of meaning of stability. But stability came from the comfort of routine, of her home, of the role that society had given her that allowed her to suppress her discomfort, the one she feels during the “certain hour of the afternoon”.

But the blind man disrupts this illusion, it brings her nausea to the forefront. Why? Perhaps the true compassion and love she feels for the blind man breaks the illusion that she loves her family. Perhaps that is why she is so troubled by him. She realises the routine she lives is built on an emotion she is only convincing herself of, not truly feeling. Suddenly, she sees her life from the outside, outside of the “woman’s fate”, of the roles she is expected to fulfil and love fulfilling.

The “nausea” she feels isn’t literal sickness, but an existential vertigo. She realises the lie that has been living and her life feels meaningless. (In the end, she snuffs out this realisation, she suppresses it, and chooses to live that lie.)

Perhaps in this context, The Garden suddenly begins to make sense. She finally steps out of the roles that have been prescribed to her, and she begins to truly see the world as it really is. Through the stream of consciousness, we the readers are brought along, as Ana’s attention wanders around her surroundings, to the “secret labour” all around her. We see, alongside Ana, the world for all its contradictions: the beauty and the excesses, the calm and the sinister. This is why the nausea is an almost positive thing. It describes the feeling of realising the truth. And the truth is uncomfortable.

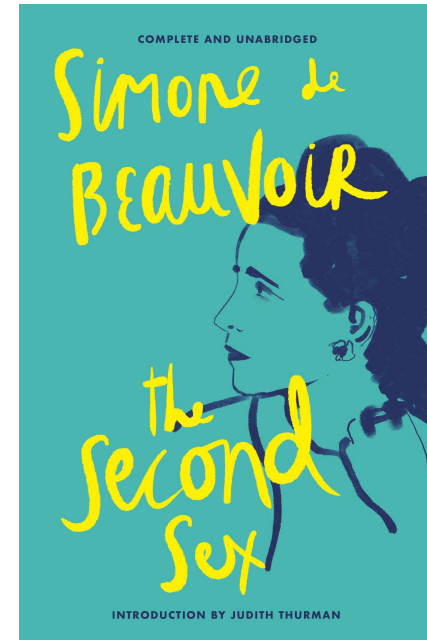
*“The trees were laden, the world was so rich it was rotting. When Ana thought how there were **children and grown men going hungry**, the nausea rose to her throat, as if she were pregnant and abandoned.” (121)*

With this lens, even the negative instances of nausea begin to make sense. Here, the irony of a world that was rich, but still had children and men that were starving makes her realise the absurdity of it all. That the world does not play by any rhyme or reason. Things just are, and things just happen.

Ana's Existential Nausea (Feminist Edition)

“One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” (Beauvoir)

- Nausea as the realisation of living a life that was imposed on you.
- The stream of consciousness works like an unreliable narrator
 - The realisation that the life Ana “had wanted and chosen” was not actually hers. (116)
 - The “woman’s fate” she had “fallen into” was not something “*she* had invented” (116)
- In the end, she feels a guilt.
 - She hugs her child, she hugs her husband, she grasps for the love that rooted her.
 - Her husband “[removes] her from the danger of living”.



If Jean-Paul Sartre explored nausea as an existential realization, Simone de Beauvoir applied to the experiences of women, in particular, the nausea in relation to the roles society imposes on them.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir famously wrote “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”

She argues that women are shaped by expectations rather than true self-definition. Their roles as wives, mothers, and caretakers are not necessarily chosen freely, but are imposed upon them as part of the structure of society.

This sharpens my argument even further. In *Amor*, at the beginning Ana loves the role of wife and mother, or at least she believes she does. Until the blind man disrupts this certainty. The nausea she experiences is not just vaguely existential, it is the nausea of *a woman's* existential crisis. The realization that the life she has built may not actually be hers.

The “woman’s fate” she had “fallen into” was not something “*she* had invented”. In this way, the stream of consciousness

In the end, she feels a deep guilt. She hugs her child, she hugs her husband, she grasps for the love that rooted her. In the end, her husband pulls her back, removes her from the danger of TRULY living, and like many women of times, she chooses to continue living her lie. She swallows her nausea and extinguishes the little flame of the day.

Clarice Lispector.

- Born Chaya Pinkhasivna Lispector in Ukraine in 1920
- Moved to Brazil as an infant to escape persecution for being Jewish during the Russian Civil War
- Married her husband, a Brazilian Diplomat, at the age of 22.
- She spent nearly two decades moving around Europe and the United States
 - "This Switzerland," she wrote her sister Tania, "is a cemetery of sensations."
 - "I hated it, but I did what I had to [...] I gave dinner parties. I did everything you're supposed to do, but with a disgust..."
- In 1959, she left her husband, and returned to Rio de Janeiro with her sons
- In 1960, Amor received a wide release in a collection titled "Family Ties".
- In 1977, she died 1 day before her birthday.



Clarice Lispector, was born Chaya Pinkhasivna Lispector in Ukraine in 1920. Mere months later, she was whisked to Brazil to escape persecution for being Jewish. She married her husband, a Brazilian Diplomat, at the age of 22. Shortly after, she spent nearly two decades mostly abroad, first moving around Europe and then in Washington DC.

"This Switzerland," she wrote her sister Tania, "is a cemetery of sensations."

About her time in Washington DC, she said: "I hated it, but I did what I had to [...] I gave dinner parties, I did everything you're supposed to do, but with a disgust..."

In 1959, she had had enough, and left her husband, and returned to Rio de Janeiro with her sons. It was only then that Amor received a wide release in a collection titled "Family Ties". She spent the rest of life in Rio, where she continued to write and publish. In 1977, she died 1 day before her birthday.

Discussion.

1. Why is Lispector's short story titled "Amor"?
2. What does the Blind Man, his chewing gum and the various locations in the story signify? Is it necessary to ascribe a symbolic meaning to them?
3. Did Ana undergo a real transformation, or will she return to her old life, unchanged?
4. To what extent do societal roles (like being a wife or mother) limit our ability to live authentically, and is it possible to balance these roles with a sense of personal identity?

Credits

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