

# Hunger's Presence

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**Abstract:** *After the attentive reading of each piece of work, this essay intends to compare Barren Lives (Vidas Secas) by Graciliano Ramos and the short story "Hunger" by James Stephen. Coming from the coincidence of the main theme inside both stories and developing a short analysis of each topic inside a narrative (character, narrator, time, structure, and atmosphere) taking into consideration the historical and regional context each author had to deal with.*

**Keywords:** *Hunger, Graciliano Ramos, James Stephen, Brazilian Literature, Irish Literature*

## Introduction

This essay intends to talk about the main characteristics of two stories focusing on the matter of **character**. These two stories were written in different contexts, so it is important to understand that this deeply affects their way of developing the same theme: hunger.

The chosen stories are "Hunger", by James Stephens (1882-1950), a short story published in the book *Etched in Moonlight* (1928) and *Barren Lives* (Vidas Secas), by Graciliano Ramos (1892- 1953), first published in 1938. The former is about a poor family; in each chapter the effect of their poverty is shown, highlighting the hunger and its consequences, the latter is also about a poor peasant family that struggles to survive each day. Its chapters were written separately and they can also be read out of order. In this sense, my proposal consists of treating the whole book lightly while focusing on the first chapter "Mudança", which tells us the hard and dry path of this family until they arrive on an abandoned farm, upon the constant shadow of hunger and of the fear that comes with this journey.

Both writers lived in the same period of time, but James Stephens, being Irish, deals with the subject that affects his nation: war, poverty and starvation that fell upon Ireland while food was being exported to England. Meanwhile in Brazil, the years of

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1930, produced many regionalist novels, especially from the Northeast, and this is the case of *Barren Lives*. Graciliano Ramos writes a novel engaged with the Brazilian context, talking about people who needed to live in a drought cycle every year.

### **Hunger's characterization**

“Hunger” has twelve chapters. *Barren Lives* has thirteen, but the first and the last one represent the same thing: the peasant family's movement. It starts and ends with the run; hence it is almost as if it had twelve chapters as well. Both stories are presented as pictures of one year in the life of these families, as twelve pictures.

In *Barren Lives* there are five characters always present, they represent the typical northeastern family: Fabiano, Sinhá Vitória, who are the parents, the younger boy, the older boy and the dog, Baleia. Notice that even the pet has its own name, but not the boys. They have no names and no physical description; it is an artifice the writer uses to highlight their misery. The narrator is omniscient and in third-person, but the point of view changes from character to character, with the development of the action; being the first chapter constructed from Fabiano's perspective. The author is always comparing the humans with animals so that it is easier to associate them with the place they have to live in; throughout the novel one can even realize that Baleia has human characteristics, while the humans present animal ones, it is an inversion to identify what starvation and suffering can do to people.

In “Hunger” there are also five characters always present in the scenes: the woman, the man and their three children, one being crippled. No character is named during the whole story; the story focuses on facts, not on people. During the action, famine increases, it is almost like a picture of a process. The woman is the main character, hence the story is told from her point of view, though it is a third-person narrative.

Both stories come from the same need to express the situation each country was going through at that period of time, how hunger was there haunting people. One can see that both authors use different literary devices to highlight the importance of hunger, its effect and consequences; it can be clearly noticed when analyzing the characters' construction in each story. *Barren Lives* have characters that could have existed; they come truly close to what reality was to the poor families of Brazil's Northeast in the 30's. The characters are not presented in a direct way, there are no description of personalities;

the reader sees their essence through their acts and their speech. In the chapter “Mudança”, Fabiano is presented as a rude, uncultured, rustic, naïve man. However, this description is not shown; the reader understands it through his actions towards other characters, by the way he dreams of his children learning the Portuguese language, and by the way he talks, from the words he uses. The characters’ features are really close to the reality of that period of time, the construction is made so one can see what was happening to them. It all contributes to typify the starvation and poverty they are in. Looking at “Hunger” we find some character idealization: for instance, the woman is almost like a “super woman”, who tries to deal with everything that is going on in her house, using any methods she can reach. The characters are presented in a direct way: “Her husband was a jolly man;” (p.28) and “He was very fond of them, and if she could have fed him on her own flesh she would have sacrificed a slice or two, for she was very fond of him.” (p. 29).

Graciliano Ramos chooses to indirectly typify the characters in his story almost as real people; the language used is really dry and based on free indirect speech. It is the field of reality, this is why it is a regionalist novel: the writers of such period were trying to show exactly what was going on with people. James Stephens chose to directly typify his characters, idealizing them as they should be to fit the purpose of his story, he does it especially to the main character. He uses a fictional story to talk about hunger’s achievement in Ireland. Ramos and Stephens walked different paths to characterize the real main character: hunger itself.

## Conclusion

The theme of hunger is a constant within literature. James Stephen and Graciliano Ramos managed to deal with it in a spectacular way. Both stories are pictures of a situation, almost as a denouncement of what was going on with those poor families. Each author represented the local problems of their original places of birth in their own style.

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