WOMEN, DRUGS, AND SUICIDE IN 1920S BRAZIL: REPRESENTATIONS IN *ENERVADAS* BY CRISANTHÈME

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Abstract: This essay examines the representation of drug use and female suicide in 1920s Brazil by analyzing newspaper articles from the Brazilian Digital Newspaper Library in conjunction with a comparative reading of the novel *Enervadas* by Crisanthème. Set against a backdrop of intense cultural and social transformation, Crisanthème's narrative captures the nuances of a society in turmoil, where the pressures of modernity, shifting urban behaviors, and challenges to patriarchal norms surface as experiences of transgression and self-destruction. The article investigates how drug use and suicide—particularly among women—function as metaphors for escape and rupture in response to oppressive gender expectations. Through this analysis, the study explores how Crisanthème incorporates these themes to reflect on the condition of women during this pivotal historical moment.
Keywords: Suicide; drugs; women's condition; Chrysanthème; comparative literature

Resumo: Este artigo explora a representação do consumo de drogas e do suicídio de mulheres no Brasil dos anos 1920, por meio da pesquisa de notícias da época no jornal da Hemeroteca Digital Brasileira em paralelo a uma análise comparativa à obra "Enervadas", de Crisanthème. Situada em um período de intensas transformações culturais e sociais, a narrativa de Crisanthème revela nuances de uma sociedade em ebulição, onde as pressões da modernidade, os novos comportamentos urbanos e o questionamento das normas patriarcais transformam-se em experiências de transgressão e autodestruição. O artigo investiga como o uso de drogas e o suicídio, especialmente entre as mulheres, emergem como metáforas de escape e ruptura diante de expectativas opressivas de gênero. A análise visa compreender de que forma Crisanthème incorpora esses temas para refletir sobre a condição das mulheres na época.
Palavras-chave: Suicídio; drogas; condição das mulheres; Chrysanthème; literatura comparada

Ah, for the opium of being someone else!

I can't sleep, I lie there, a waking, feeling corpse,

And any feeling is just an empty thought.

– Álvaro de Campos, *Insomnia*

During Brazil's First Republic (1889–1930), the boundary between existence and non-existence, life and death, was precariously thin for women. This fragility stemmed from the suffocating social customs of the time, which are vividly depicted in contemporary literature—particularly in works authored by women. One notable example is the novel *Enervadas* (1922), written by Chrysanthème, the pseudonym of Brazilian writer Maria Cecília Bandeira de Melo Vasconcelos. The title, which can be translated as *Enervated Women*, carries layered meanings that require linguistic and cultural contextualization. In 19th- and early 20th-century Brazil, mental illnesses were often referred to as "nervous conditions" or "illnesses of the nerves," and these were frequently attributed "naturally" to women, as if femininity itself implied a latent pathology. Moreover, the adjective *enervada* [enervated] was commonly used to describe women who voiced social criticism or deviated from established gender norms. Closely linked to the period's medicalized concept of "hysteria," the term functioned as a discursive tool to uphold male dominance at a time when women were beginning to claim certain social rights. Confronted with the impossibility of living free from such oppressive constraints, many women saw death as the only conceivable form of escape.

This article analyzes the representation of drug use and female suicide in 1920s Brazil, using the novel *Enervadas* (1922) by the writer Chrysanthème as its central lens. The aim is to examine how the author—writing amid the intense cultural and social transformations of Rio de Janeiro's Belle Époque—employs these themes as metaphors for the pressures of modernity, emerging urban behaviors, and the growing challenge to patriarchal norms that shaped women's lives. Drawing on research from contemporary periodicals available through the Brazilian Digital Newspaper Library, this study seeks to contextualize Chrysanthème's fiction in relation to the social discourses of the time, exploring how female transgression and self-destruction were represented and interpreted within the broader cultural imagination.

Chrysanthème, the pseudonym of Cecília Moncorvo Bandeira de Mello Rebello de Vasconcellos (Rio de Janeiro, February 8, 1869 – August 22, 1948), was a central—though often overlooked—figure in the Brazilian literary and journalistic scene of the early 20th century. The daughter of the renowned chronicler Carmen Dolores (Emília Moncorvo Bandeira de Mello), Chrysanthème inherited both a talent for writing and a keen critical

insight into the society of her time. Her literary output, comprising more than twenty titles, includes novels, short stories, and chronicles in which she frequently explored the female condition, social dynamics, and the customs of Rio de Janeiro's elite. After being widowed in 1907, she intensified her literary activity, becoming a prominent voice in debates on women's rights and the cultural transformations then underway. Her pseudonym—borrowed from Pierre Loti's novel—stands in ironic contrast to her incisive social critique and advocacy for feminist causes. Among her most notable works, in addition to *Enervadas*, are *Flores Modernas* [Modern Flowers] (1921), *Gritos Femininos* [Feminine Cries] (1922), and *A Infanta Carlota Joaquina* (1936).

Published in 1922, the novel *Enervadas* immerses the reader in the world of elite women in Rio de Janeiro who, suffocated by social conventions and a lack of prospects, seek relief and escape through substances such as cocaine and morphine, flirting with self-destruction. The narrative traces the lives of female characters who, despite their apparent privilege, experience a deep existential malaise. Their existence is marked by idleness, the pressure to conform to restrictive ideals of femininity, and the absence of spaces for personal and intellectual fulfillment. The title, *Enervadas*, evokes a state of nervous exhaustion and emotional fragility—an affliction frequently attributed to women at the time—but Chrysanthème approaches this condition with critical nuance, suggesting it is less a personal pathology than a symptom of systemic gender oppression. The central characters, whose names and destinies intertwine, embody various facets of this feminine crisis: from the disillusioned young dreamer to the mature woman who quietly resists societal constraints. The novel does not shy away from portraying the sophisticated yet decadent settings these women inhabit, where drug use emerges as both a ritual of transgression and a desperate attempt to numb the pain of existence. This study, therefore, analyzes how Chrysanthème, through the experiences of her characters in *Enervadas*, reflects on the complex condition of women during a transitional period in which the promises of modernity collided with archaic and oppressive social structures.

To deepen the analysis of *Enervadas* and its significance as a cultural artifact that reflects the social tensions of its time, this study draws on the theoretical framework of Fredric Jameson —particularly his concept of the "political unconscious." In his seminal work *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), Jameson—one of the most influential Marxist literary critics—argues that literature, even when not explicitly political, encodes within its formal and narrative structures the contradictions and conflicts of its historical moment. For Jameson, history is not merely a background to the literary text,

but something that literature actively reworks and negotiates through symbolic means. Jameson proposes that every literary work can be read on multiple levels, each revealing different horizons of meaning. One of these is the political horizon, which manifests not only in the themes explored but also in the narrative construction, the choice of genres, and the ideological "strategies of containment" the text may employ—consciously or unconsciously. These strategies symbolically attempt to resolve social contradictions that remain irreconcilable in historical reality. In this view, literature becomes a space in which the anxieties, repressed desires, and structural tensions of a given social formation are expressed—often in veiled, distorted, or allegorical forms.

Applying this perspective to *Enervadas*, we can interpret Chrysanthème's novel not merely as a depiction of the lives of elite women in 1920s Rio de Janeiro, but as a symptom of the broader transformations and crises of capitalism and patriarchy during that period. The characters' drug use and suicidal ideation, for instance, may be read as manifestations of the era's "political unconscious"—symbolically charged acts that articulate alienation, existential malaise, and the desire to escape oppressive social structures. Moreover, the novel's fragmented and at times erratic narrative form can be understood as a reflection of the disintegration of traditional values and the profound uncertainty brought about by modernity.

Jameson invites us to view literature as a symbolic battleground where competing discourses and ideologies confront and negotiate with one another. In *Enervadas*, the representation of female transgression, existential ennui, and the search for new forms of sensibility can be interpreted as an attempt to give narrative shape to the contradictions faced by women within a context of conservative modernization. A Jamesonian analysis thus enables us to move beyond a surface reading of the text, revealing deeper layers of social and historical significance embedded in its themes and narrative structure.

Furthermore, given the recurring presence of substances such as morphine and cocaine as leitmotifs in the novel, we conducted research in Brazil's Digital Newspaper Library (BNDigital) to investigate the drug policies of the period concerning what are now classified as illegal substances. During this research, we encountered numerous reports and notices about women who had died by suicide through overdoses of these drugs. The way these cases were reported—often including full names, surnames, addresses, and speculated motivations—reinforces the hypothesis that suicide was frequently perceived, and perhaps socially framed, as the only possible escape from an unbearable reality. This article, therefore, seeks to analyze how drugs and death function in Chrysanthème's *Enervadas* as symbolic acts

that express the entrapment of women's lives during this period. It also draws a comparison between these fictional elements and the journalistic portrayals found in *Correio da Manhã* and *O Jornal*, two Rio de Janeiro newspapers that frequently reported on cases of female suicide by overdose. The selection of these newspapers is justified not only by the recurrence of such reports but also by their geographical and cultural proximity to the novel's diegesis, which is set in the same city.

Chrysanthème's pseudonym itself is a form of satirical construction, referencing the character Madame Chrysanthème from Pierre Loti's 1888 novel of the same name—a passive and exoticized Japanese woman married to a French naval officer. In contrast, *Enervadas* centers on Lúcia, the protagonist, who is labeled "enervated" by a psychiatrist. This diagnosis, however, lacks any scientific foundation, a point underscored in a dialogue with her second husband: "'—The illustrious Aesculapius labeled me 'enervated.' What do you say? / —Did Dr. Armando Lins really use this modern term that now fills the pages of novels?'" (Chrysanthème 108–109)[1]. Within the narrative, "nervousness" is portrayed as a fashionable diagnosis, emblematic of the time's pseudo-scientific tendencies and used indiscriminately to describe women's discontent. The protagonist-narrator eventually applies this label to all her friends, suggesting a broader critique of the medical and social discourses that pathologized female behavior.

As for the narrative focus, since the story is structured around Lúcia's memoirs, it is centered on her perspective—that of a bourgeois woman living in the 1920s. The element of social class is strongly present throughout the narrative, as illustrated in the following passage:

> As an only child, I had all the affection of this mismatched couple, but it was so rarely expressed that I often forgot about it and clung instead to the Black maid who cared for me. Yet, I was never truly cruel. I always showed kindness to our old dog, Nestor, and would shed tears whenever my mother, annoyed by the poor animal's licking, pushed him away with her foot or whatever object happened to be within reach. (Crisanthème 14)[2]

[1] "— O ilustre esculápio pôs-me em cima a etiqueta de "enervada". Que dizes?/— O dr. Armando Lins empregou deveras esse moderno termo que enche agora as páginas dos romances? — gritou quase Roberto surpreso."
All translations are ours unless otherwise mentioned.

[2] Como filha única, possuía a inteira afeição desse casal tão disparatado, mas essa afeição só transparecia em tão raros momentos que muitas vezes, esquecida dela, eu me agarrava à criada preta que cuidava de mim. Mas eu nunca fui realmente má. Tinha sempre um gesto de carinho para o nosso velho cão Nestor, e vertia lágrimas

The absence of affection in familial relationships drives the protagonist to seek solace in the figure of the "Black maid." Shortly thereafter, however, the narrative introduces "the dog Nestor," who becomes the target of a certain degree of violence inflicted by the mother—much to Lúcia's dismay. What stands out in this passage is not only the plot itself but also the use of stylistic devices and the narrative's construction of parallels. Three relationships are at play: those with the parents, the Black maid, and the dog Nestor. Focusing on the latter two, which are more fully developed in the excerpt, it becomes evident that the Black maid is mentioned only briefly and in a racialized manner, as if her identity were entirely reduced to her social role (maid) and the color of her skin (Black). She is not given a name, nor are any traits attributed to her that might transcend these markers of race and class. In contrast, Lúcia's affection for "the dog Nestor" is foregrounded; the animal is named and portrayed in a way that elicits care and compassion from the protagonist—almost as if he were more humanized than the maid. It is, therefore, from this privileged position that Lúcia narrates her experiences.

Although all of Lúcia's basic needs appear to be met, she suffers under the weight of societal pressure to marry and assume the role of the devoted wife. Within the diegesis, her friend Margarida is constructed as the embodiment of the social ideal: a married woman with several children, seemingly content in every social setting. In contrast, Lúcia maintains two friendships that represent forms of resistance to the normative gender roles of the time: Maria Helena, a lesbian, and Magdalena Fragoso, a single woman who is perpetually under the influence of some kind of psychotropic substance. It is this latter friendship that serves as the catalyst for the protagonist's own initiation into drug use, including substances such as morphine and cocaine. In this context, drugs are not merely a thematic element but emerge as a formal device—a leitmotif that, within a landscape of gendered oppression, signifies the possibility of escape. While functioning symbolically within the diegesis, this leitmotif acquires a more material dimension when juxtaposed with contemporaneous newspaper reports.

According to Fredric Jameson, history can only be grasped through the mediation of texts, which require interpretation, as it becomes accessible solely through a process of "retextualization":

> History is therefore the experience of Necessity, and it is this alone which can forestall its thematization or reification as a mere object of representation

quando minha mãe, aborrecida com as lambidelas do pobre animal, o empurrava com o pé ou com qualquer outra coisa que encontrasse à mão.

> or as one master code among many others. Necessity is not in that sense a type of content, but rather the inexorable form of events; it is therefore a narrative category in the enlarged sense of some properly narrative political unconscious which has been argued here, a retextualization of History which does not propose the latter as some new representation or "vision," some new content, but as the formal effects of what Althusser, following Spinoza, calls an "absent cause." (Jameson 87-88).

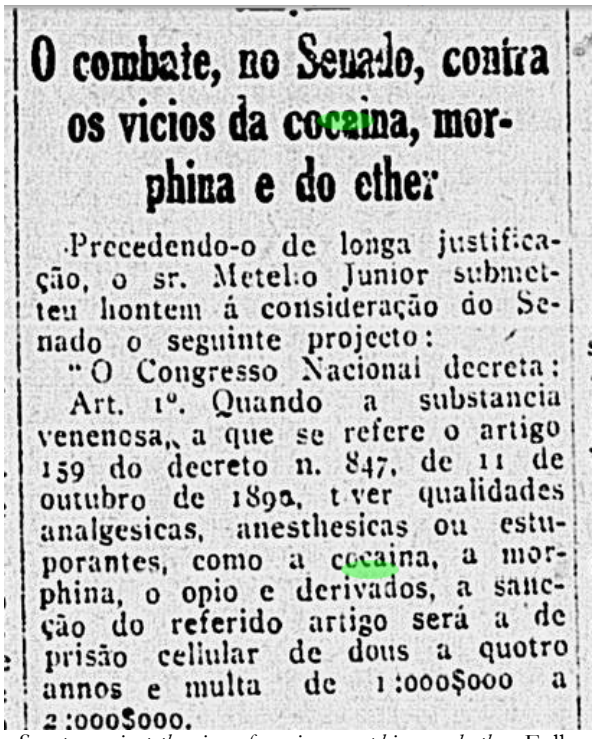
Jameson's method of interpretation is structured around three "concentric frameworks," each expanding the social horizon of a given text. First, political history is considered, understood as the chronological record of events and developments. Next, attention shifts to society, approached through the lens of class struggle and structural tensions. Finally, history is interpreted in its broadest dimension: as the succession of modes of production and social formations. These interpretative layers expose a latent political unconscious embedded in the narrative structure, one that cannot be accessed directly but only through symptomatic reading.

Enervadas is set against the backdrop of a turbulent period in Brazilian history—the final years of the First Republic. The 1920s were marked by deep political and social unrest, culminating in the Revolution of 1930. In the political sphere, the emergence of the *tenentismo* movement—led by young military officers—sought to challenge the dominance of the rural oligarchic elite. Simultaneously, labor and socialist movements were gaining traction, notably with the founding of the Brazilian Communist Party in 1922. That same year witnessed the landmark *Semana de Arte Moderna* (Modern Art Week), a pivotal cultural event that attempted to forge a distinctly Brazilian aesthetic identity through experimental and subversive artistic practices, in stark opposition to prevailing conservative values. This convergence of political, social, and cultural forces fostered a climate of upheaval and transformation.

Economically, Brazil in the 1910s and 1920s, though still reliant on agricultural exports, began receiving significant investment in industrial development. These changes were driven both by Republican aspirations to modernize the nation and by shifts in global capital during World War I, which opened new markets for Brazilian goods. The economic boom—fueled by exports of coffee and rubber—provided ample capital for investment. At the same time, the state's "whitening" policies encouraged mass European immigration, ensuring a steady supply of cheap labor.

As previously mentioned, this study investigates representations of drug use among Brazilian women in the early twentieth century, focusing on female characters in *Enervadas* and on contemporary newspaper reports of women who died by suicide through drug overdose. Thus, an understanding of the socio-historical context must also take into account the drug policies and legislation in effect at the time of the novel's publication. In 1920, Brazil was undergoing significant shifts in its drug legislation—a process widely reported in the newspaper *Correio da Manhã:*

Figure 1: Correio da Manhã. n. 7764, Jun. 03, 1920.



O combate, no Senado, contra os vicios da cocaina, morphina e do ether

Precedendo-o de longa justificação, o sr. Metello Junior submetteu hontem á consideração do Senado o seguinte projecto:

"O Congresso Nacional decreta:

Art. 1º. Quando a substancia venenosa, a que se refere o artigo 159 do decreto n. 847, de 11 de outubro de 1890, tiver qualidades analgesicas, anesthesicas ou estuporantes, como a cocaina, a morphina, o opio e derivados, a sancção do referido artigo será a de prisão celiular de dous a quotro annos e multa de 1:000$000 a 2:000$000.

Translation: *The fight, in the Senate, against the vices of cocaine, morphine, and ether.* Following a lengthy justification, Mr. Metello Junior yesterday submitted the following bill to the consideration of the Senate: "The National Congress decrees: Article 1. When the poisonous substance referred to in Article 159 of Decree No. 847, dated October 11, 1890, has analgesic, anesthetic, or stupefying properties, such as cocaine, morphine, opium, and their derivatives, the penalty for the violation of the aforementioned article shall be imprisonment for a term of two to four years and a fine of 1,000$000 to 2,000$000."

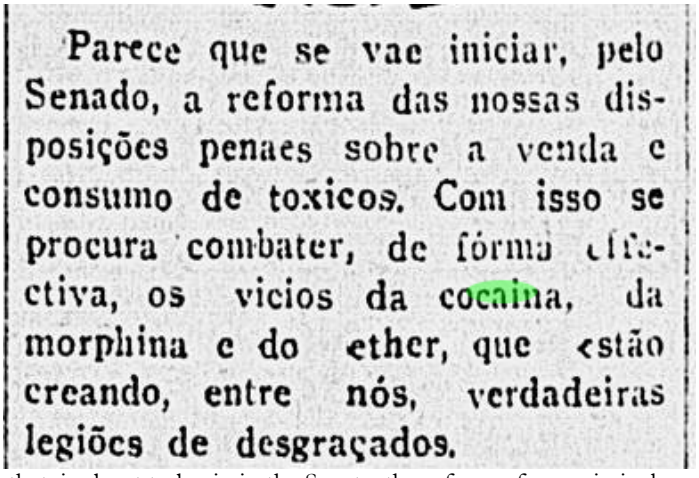
The news article in question reports on a bill proposed by Senator Metello Júnior, which addresses Article 159 of Decree No. 847 from 1890. This article classified as a public health crime the act of "exposing for sale or administering poisonous substances without legitimate authorization and without the formalities prescribed by sanitary regulations," with penalties ranging from a fine of 200$000 to 500$000. However, the original article does not specify which substances fall under the category of "poisonous." The new bill seeks to clarify this ambiguity by explicitly identifying such substances as drugs with "analgesic, anesthetic, or stupefying properties, such as cocaine, morphine, and their derivatives."

It is clear that since the late 19th century, the use of "poisonous substances" had been viewed negatively. Nonetheless, policies regarding their use and sale remained vague. Momentum grew in the Senate, and in 1921—one year after the aforementioned news—President Epitácio Pessoa signed Decree No. 4,294. The summary of this decree states: "Establishes penalties for offenders involved in the sale of cocaine, opium, morphine, and their derivatives; creates a special institution for the internment of individuals intoxicated by alcohol or poisonous substances; establishes procedures for prosecution and judgment; and allocates the necessary funds." Unlike the generality of the 1890 provision, Decree No. 4,294 specifies which substances would be subject to criminalization: "cocaine, opium, morphine, and their derivatives." It introduces fines and provisions for the creation of institutions for the compulsory or voluntary internment of individuals addicted to alcohol or other substances.

Further regulation came with the signing of Decree No. 14,969, also in 1921, which introduced more detailed measures for controlling the entry of "toxic substances" into Brazil. Among its provisions was the establishment of a "Sanatorium for Drug Addicts" in the Federal District, described as "an institution for providing medical and corrective treatment, through labor, to those intoxicated by alcohol or intoxicating or stupefying substances." Notably, this formulation combines medical treatment with corrective disciplinary measures. The hygienist medical discourse of the time aimed to "cleanse" social ills in the name of progress, which demanded healthy, productive, and morally upright individuals.

The idea of correcting deviant behavior reflects a broader societal imaginary concerning drug users during this period. These conceptions are echoed in other newspaper clippings from the time, revealing the strong moralizing discourse imposed on behaviors associated with drug consumption:

Figure 2: Correio da Manhã. n. 7763, Jun. 02, 1920.


Parece que se vae iniciar, pelo Senado, a reforma das nossas disposições penaes sobre a venda e consumo de toxicos. Com isso se procura combater, de fórma effectiva, os vicios da cocaina, da morphina e do ether, que estão creando, entre nós, verdadeiras legiões de desgraçados.

Translation: It seems that, is about to begin in the Senate, the reform of our criminal provisions regarding the sale and consumption of narcotics. With this, the aim is to effectively combat the addictions to cocaine, morphine, and ether, which are creating, among us, true legions of the unfortunate.

The newspaper clippings reveal how the public imagination surrounding drug use was constructed during this historical period. In these sources, drug users are frequently portrayed as wretched or morally degraded—a representation rooted in dominant discourses that condemned those who deviated from the social norms and expectations of the time. The moralization of drug use is closely tied to the discourse of modern hygienist medicine, which assessed such practices through binary scales of positive and negative value. Use deemed "positive" was that which served to cure a physical or moral ailment or to correct behavior—rendering an audacious individual submissive or invigorating an apathetic one—in service of the demands of productivity in a capitalist society striving for modernization. Any use of psychoactive substances that bypassed medical authorization or utility was delegitimized and placed on the negative end of the moral spectrum (Silva). Consequently, when women consumed opioids recreationally—as a form of resistance to patriarchal oppression—the moral discourse of modern medicine responded by pathologizing and criminalizing their actions. At times, such behaviors were labeled as hysteria; at others, as signs of moral or biological degeneration. It is crucial to note, however, that this moralism was not uniformly applied; rather, it depended on the social position of the individual. The further a person stood from the idealized subject—the white, heterosexual, cisgender elite male—the more subjected they were to moral scrutiny and control.

The dominant model of womanhood in that period required women to display sensitivity, docility, submission to male authority, domestic aptitude, and the aspiration to marriage and motherhood. Any deviation from this normative framework—whether in conduct, speech, or desire—was seen as a sign of deviance and illness. As Viviane Botton observes, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a significant number of women were

institutionalized in psychiatric hospitals under the diagnosis of hysteria. The concept, imported from European medical traditions, became entrenched in Brazilian medical discourse through the work of physician Antônio Austregésilo Rodrigues Lima (1876–1960). Unlike some of his contemporaries, Austregésilo did not regard hysteria as a constitutional illness, but rather as a temporary condition. He argued that it could be reversed through the moral and behavioral reeducation of the affected woman. Physicians were tasked with teaching her to "control her impulses and feminine weaknesses," with the ultimate goal of reintegrating her into the family and the broader social order.

In this context, the so-called hysterical woman was institutionalized in psychiatric hospitals to undergo a form of "reeducation" aimed at instilling the supposed natural qualities of femininity, such as sensitivity, maternal instinct, and domesticity. In practice, however, this reeducation often involved violent and coercive treatments, including "electroshock, spasmodic injections, straitjackets, and lobotomizing procedures" (Botton). The symptoms attributed to hysteria included emotional instability, irritability, disobedience, vanity, excessive sexual desire, and neglect of domestic responsibilities (Cupello). As such, hysteria functioned as a diagnostic category that pathologized non-conforming female behavior, and institutionalization served as a mechanism to remove these women from public life. Rehabilitation efforts within these institutions, in turn, became instruments of control and discipline, enforcing gender norms and regulating conduct.

Yet, it is crucial to recognize that deviation from these norms also constituted a form of resistance. For many women, such deviations were strategies for asserting their own existence in defiance of the moral codes imposed on their bodies and behaviors. These acts of resistance manifested in diverse ways, and in *Enervadas*, the characters Maria Helena and Magdalena personify some of them. As white, upper-class women, they are relatively insulated from the harsher consequences often faced by women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Though their behaviors—such as drug use or rejection of heteronormative roles—are socially condemned, they are not criminalized or subjected to psychiatric institutionalization. Nevertheless, their social privilege does not exempt them from patriarchal control, and they remain entangled in asymmetrical power structures that condition their agency and constrain their possibilities for autonomy.

In 1920s Brazil, male authority over women remained deeply entrenched, relegating women to a subordinate legal and social status under male guardianship. This dynamic is particularly evident in the cases we examined from the newspapers *Correio da Manhã* (Morning Courier) and *O Jornal* (The Newspaper). Reports on drug overdoses provide

stark evidence of the public scrutiny women faced: their full names, ages, and addresses were published, creating an atmosphere akin to criminal reporting. This exposure not only reinforced their marginalization but also fed into a broader moralizing discourse that sought to control and shame female bodies and behaviors. (Fig. 3):

Figure 3: Correio da Manhã. n. 4654, Feb. 12, 1920.

Quiz morrer antes do carnaval

A decahida Maria de Souza, residente á rua Tobias Barreto 100 A, parda, de 20 annos, tentou suicidar-se hontem, bebendo cocaina.

A Assistencia compareceu a tempo de salval-a do perigo.

Translation: *She wanted to die before carnival.* The wrecked Maria de Souza, resident at Tobias Barreto Street 100 A, brown, 20 years old, tried to commit suicide yesterday by taking cocaine. Assistance arrived in time to save her from danger.

The adjective *"decahida"*—modernized as *"decaída"*—literally means "fallen." However, it also carries a connotative weight, referring to someone perceived as lost, morally degraded, or devoid of future prospects—a label historically and predominantly applied to women, much like the term *"enervada."* In contrast, when referring to men, newspapers tended to preserve their dignity by withholding personal details such as names and addresses (Fig. 4):

Figure 4: Correio da Manhã. Mar. 14, 1920.

O VICIO DO OPIO E DA COCAINA

—:—

Dois chinezes foram pronunciados

Por certo ninguem conhece Link e Leck. Pois saibam os leitores que num beco que desemboca na rua da Misericordia, esses chinezes mantêm o commercio, do vicio, fazendo fumar, a moços de nossa sociedade, cujos nomes por um motivo de piedade não declaramos, cachimbos onde se queima o opio, a 5$000, por duas cachimbadas.

Descorberta a contravenção aggravada com a venda da cocaina e outros toxicos excitantes, a policia abriu inquerito.

Translation: *THE VICE OF OPIUM AND COCAINE – Two Chinese Men Indicted.* Certainly, no one knows Link and Leck. Well, let readers be informed that in an alley leading to Rua da Misericórdia, these Chinese men run a den of vice, allowing young men from our society – whose names we shall not reveal out of pity – to smoke pipes filled with opium at the price of 5$000 for two puffs. Once the illicit activity was discovered, aggravated by the sale of cocaine and other stimulating drugs, the police launched an investigation.

While information about addicted women was openly disclosed, newspapers often withheld even the names of male users. This disparity reflects a broader social reality: women have historically been—and continue to be—more harshly judged than men for exhibiting so-called "deviant behaviors." Female morality was regarded as a cornerstone of social order, and public exposure functioned as a disciplinary tool, reinforcing gender norms. In contrast, men's transgressions were typically dismissed as temporary lapses, unworthy of lasting stigma. In the novel, upon receiving her diagnosis—predictably delivered by a male doctor—Lúcia quickly internalizes the label *enervada* and projects it onto her circle of friends, especially Magdalena Fragoso, who is depicted as struggling with addiction. This gesture illustrates how women, under patriarchal influence, may participate in reproducing the very discourses that oppress them:

> All of my friends, then, are "enervadas" like me, for they seem just as afflicted by the same fits that torment me—or lift me to the seventh heaven! Maria Helena, who obsessively clings to Kate Villela's short skirt, must undoubtedly be the same as I am. And Laura, always irritated with poor Luiz—so rarely affectionate toward him, despite his ruinous efforts with receptions, theater outings, and lavish outfits for her—must also, necessarily, be an enervada. As for Magdalena Fragoso, she hardly needs mentioning. After ingesting so

> much cocaine, she loses her mind for three or four hours each day; in that fevered state, she summons the chauffeur into the living room, calls him her son, her brother, hands him all the money she has, and proclaims herself a fierce Bolshevik (Chrysanthème 8-9)[3]

Despite her friend's addiction, the protagonist-narrator reveals in a flashforward that she too would eventually succumb to substance dependence. For the time being, however, her attachment was limited to the scent of flowers. Isolated in her room, she would embrace the flowers, immersing herself in an atmosphere of decay and malaise:

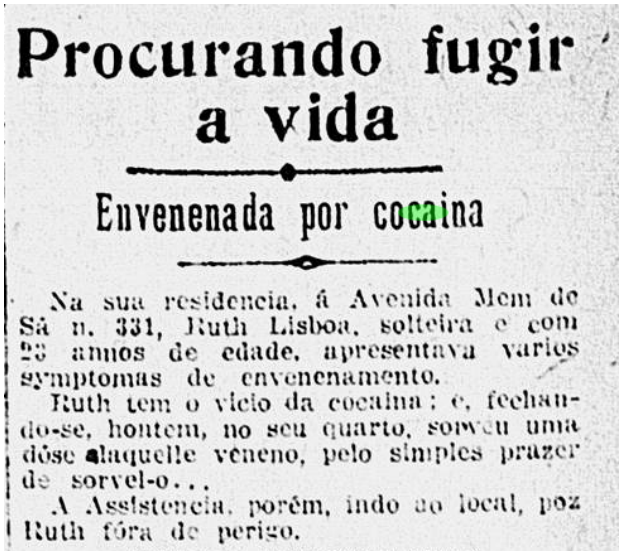
> On those days, I would lock myself in my room, close all the windows and curtains, and, lying on my bed with a damp bouquet of roses or carnations in my arms, I would vaguely muse about a thousand things or simply drift into a sickly drowsiness. For the time being, I didn't think about morphine, which gives us paradisiacal intoxication, nor about cocaine, which, after a brief exhilaration, offers the fleeting stillness of an apparent death. (Chrysanthème 17)[4]

In her account, there is a clear association between cocaine and death, as she describes—seemingly with considerable familiarity—the drug's ability to induce a sensation of stillness that resembles death. However, this relationship also carries a symbolic dimension. It prompts the question of whether the suicide notes and reports published in *Correio da Manhã* and *O Jornal* referred to actual acts of self-harm, or whether some of these cases were overdoses misrepresented—or interpreted—as suicides. As the following news item suggests, this ambiguity was not uncommon (Fig. 5):

[3] Todas as minhas amigas são então como eu umas "enervadas", porque me parecem vítimas dos mesmos acessos que me martirizam ou me elevam ao sétimo céu! A Maria Helena, que vive presa à saiazinha curta da Kate Villela, é forçosamente o mesmo que eu, e Laura, sempre irritada contra o pobre Luiz, e tão poucas vezes carinhosa para ele,
que se arruína em recepções, em teatros, em toilettes para ela, tem de ser forçosamente também uma "enervada". Não falo da Magdalena Fragoso, porque esta, à força de ingerir cocaína, perde a cabeça três ou quatro horas por dia, e nesse estado de excitação manda vir o chauffeur para a sala, chama-lhe filho, irmão, dá-lhe todo o dinheiro que possui e intitula-se bolchevista feroz.

[4] Nesses dias, encerrava-me no meu quarto, fechava todas as janelas e cortinas e, no meu leito, abraçada a um úmido ramalhete de rosas ou de cravos, eu cismava vagamente em mil coisas, ou simplesmente modorrava de um modo doentio. Não pensava por enquanto na morfina, que nos causa bebedeiras paradisíacas, nem na cocaína, que, depois de uma ligeira exaltação, nos serve a calma sem eternidade de uma morte aparente.

Figure 5: O Jornal. n. 259. Mar. 02, 1920.



Procurando fugir a vida

Envenenada por cocaina

Na sua residencia, á Avenida Mem de Sá n. 331, Ruth Lisboa, solteira e com 23 annos de edade, apresentava varios symptomas de envenenamento.

Ruth tem o vicio da cocaina; e, fechando-se, hontem, no seu quarto, sorveu uma dôse daquelle veneno, pelo simples prazer de sorvel-o...

A Assistencia, porém, indo ao local, poz Ruth fóra de perigo.

Translation: *Seeking to Escape Life – Poisoned by Cocaine.* At her residence on Avenida Mem de Sá, 331, Ruth Lisboa, a 23-year-old single woman, exhibited several symptoms of poisoning. Ruth is addicted to cocaine, and yesterday, after locking herself in her room, she consumed a dose of the substance purely for the pleasure of doing so. However, assistance arrived at the scene and managed to save Ruth from danger.

The news article presents an inherent contradiction: while the headline suggests a suicide attempt, the body of the text claims that the individual consumed the substance "purely for the pleasure of doing so." The explicit mention of Ruth's name, age, marital status, and address exposes her to public scrutiny and reinforces prevailing societal stigmas surrounding addiction and female behavior. By identifying her as a "single woman," the report implicitly frames her actions within a broader discourse of moral and social deviance, reflecting the patriarchal and judgmental lens through which women's conduct was often interpreted at the time. Furthermore, the article's emphasis on her rescue shifts the focus from her personal suffering to the intervention itself, reinforcing a narrative of institutional control over deviant behavior—often classified as madness, particularly in the case of women.

This same dynamic is echoed in the novel, when Lúcia reflects on her relationship with Magdalena Fragoso. She portrays their bond as unhealthy or pathological, subtly mirroring societal discourses that pathologize female intimacy and pleasure. Lúcia's own addiction to the scent of flowers is framed in similar terms, suggesting a symbolic alignment between feminine desire, illness, and transgression:

> Soon after, Magdalena Fragoso entered my life—beautiful, with the delicate fragility of a sickly flower. She had just begun injecting herself with morphine, soon to be followed by cocaine. When I first met her, she was in a phase of feverish excitement, evident in the fire in her eyes, shadowed by dark circles,

> and in the coldness of her perfumed hands, which ended in trembling fingers (Chrysanthème 34)[5]

Lúcia's relationship with Magdalena represents yet another form of escape—one that goes beyond the chemical "trips" induced by drug use. When Lúcia describes her "perfumed friend" with "trembling fingers," the language is laden with evocative sensuality, suggesting an undercurrent of lesbian desire or intimacy. This depiction blends physicality with poetic imagery, signaling a connection between the two women that surpasses conventional friendship and enters the realm of a subtle, almost unspeakable eroticism. The sensual tone also reflects the societal taboos of the time: just as drug use was condemned, so too were expressions of female desire—especially those directed toward other women.

Within this context, Lúcia's focus on Magdalena's physical attributes can be interpreted as an attempt to articulate a form of intimacy that she herself may not fully understand or that the dominant moral discourse of the time prohibits her from expressing openly. The passage thus illustrates how the narrative entwines physical addiction with emotional and relational dependency. Magdalena becomes, for Lúcia, not only a companion in her experimentation with altered states, but also a symbol of another kind of forbidden pleasure.

The portrayal of their relationship functions as a broader commentary on transgressive desires—both chemical and sexual—and their role in providing fleeting moments of liberation from the rigid constraints of a patriarchal, moralistic society. By depicting Magdalena as simultaneously alluring and tragic, the narrative underscores the complex entanglement of desire, addiction, and repression in Lúcia's world. Ultimately, Lúcia succumbs to this desire after her husband, Júlio, leaves the house, marking a turning point in her descent into both emotional and chemical dependency:

> Magdalena intrigued me deeply, and one night, while Júlio was away, she convinced me to let her inject me with her cherished Pravaz syringe, filled with the poison she adored. Lying together on my soft marital bed, we surrendered to the sweet toxin that carried us to the land of Morpheus, where

[5] Logo depois entrou na minha vida a Magdalena Fragoso, bela, de uma beleza de flor doente. Principiava a picar-se com a morfina, a que sucedeu logo a cocaína. Quando me foi apresentada, ela estava no período da excitação febril, demonstrada pela chama dos seus olhos circundados de olheiras e pela gelidez das suas mãos perfumadas que terminavam em dedos trêmulos.

> I was plagued by dreadful dreams that ended in waves of uncontrollable nausea. (Chrysanthème 34)[6]

The passage explores a complex interplay of desire, addiction, and escape, highlighting the tension between lesbian intimacy, drug use, and the metaphorical retreat into the "land of Morpheus." The narrator's relationship with Magdalena is both seductive and perilous. Their encounter—occurring while Júlio, the husband, is away—signals an act of defiance against societal and marital norms. In a moment of profound vulnerability, the narrator allows Magdalena to inject her with morphine, a substance that embodies both physical and emotional escape.

This scene operates as a metaphor for the exploration of forbidden desires, particularly the taboo of lesbian intimacy in early twentieth-century Brazil. The reference to the "soft marital bed" sharply contrasts the normative, heteronormative space of marriage with the transgressive, illicit bond formed between the two women. Morphine, described as "the sweet poison," symbolizes a double-edged escape: it offers fleeting relief from societal pressures while also carrying the seeds of destruction. It induces a temporary sense of euphoria but also leads to "dreadful dreams" and "uncontrollable nausea," mirroring the ambivalence the narrator feels toward both the drug and the relationship—at once liberating and harmful.

The narrative's shift in tone becomes more pronounced when Magdalena transitions from morphine to cocaine. From this moment on, Lúcia begins to describe her as someone who is "out of reason and balance," marking a turning point in both the characterization of Magdalena and the narrator's perception of her. The shift not only underscores the escalating dangers of addiction but also reflects the instability of their emotional and physical connection, now spiraling into something increasingly unsustainable:

> Magdalena emerged from that strange sleep as if from a bath of milk—never had her skin seemed so white to me, nor her beauty so unsettling. Today, she scoffs at morphine, dismissing it as a child's plaything, and surrenders entirely

[6] Magdalena interessou-me muito e, uma noite em que Júlio saíra, ela me induziu a deixar-me picar pela sua seringuinha de Pravaz que continha o veneno que ela tanto apreciava. E ambas, deitadas sobre o meu fofo leito conjugal, entregamo-nos ao doce veneno que nos levou ao país de Morfeu, dando-me a mim uns sonhos tremendos, que findaram em náuseas incoercíveis.

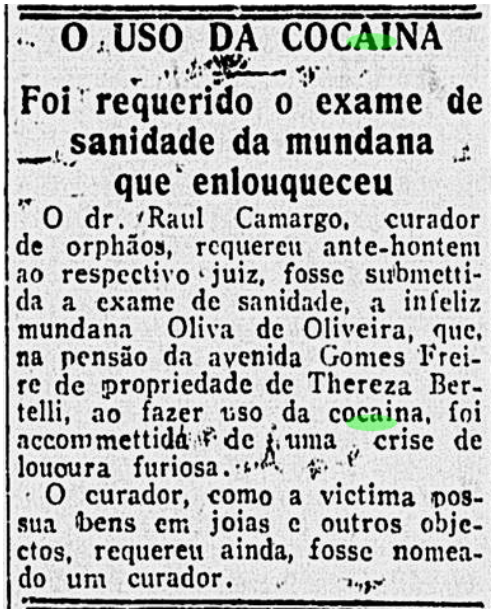
> to the formidable power of cocaine, which transforms her into a being beyond reason and balance. (Chrysanthème 34)[7]

It becomes clear that, for Lúcia, there is a complex blend of fascination and discomfort in her perception of Magdalena. Magdalena is portrayed as someone who exists "beyond reason and balance," suggesting that her use of cocaine transports her to a space of apparent freedom—liberated from societal constraints—but also to one of instability, where logic and self-control begin to dissolve. The allure she exerts on those around her seems to stem from this rebellious, untamed quality. At the same time, the effects of the drug render her "mad" in the eyes of others—a figure who transgresses the boundaries of what is considered normal or rational.

This association between irrationality and femininity echoes the representations found in the newspaper articles previously analyzed. In both literature and the press, women who deviate from prescribed norms—whether through drug use, sexual transgression, or refusal to conform to domestic expectations—are often portrayed as irrational, unstable, or emotionally excessive. Such portrayals reflect the broader gendered discourse of the time, in which female behavior was constantly scrutinized and pathologized. (Fig. 6):

[7] Magdalena surgiu desse estranho sono como de um banho de leite e nunca a sua pele me pareceu mais branca e a sua formosura mais inquietadora. Hoje ela desdenha a morfina, que apelida de brinquedo para crianças, entregando-se toda à formidável cocaína, que a transforma num ser fora do mundo da razão e do equilíbrio.

Figure 6 - Correio da Manhã. n. 7744, May. 14, 1920.



O USO DA COCAINA

Foi requerido o exame de sanidade da mundana que enlouqueceu

O dr. Raul Camargo, curador de orphãos, requereu ante-hontem ao respectivo juiz, fosse submettida a exame de sanidade, a infeliz mundana Oliva de Oliveira, que, na pensão da avenida Gomes Freire de propriedade de Thereza Bertelli, ao fazer uso da cocaina, foi accommettida de uma crise de loucura furiosa.

O curador, como a victima possua bens em joias e outros objectos, requereu ainda, fosse nomeado um curador.

Translation: *The Use of Cocaine – A mental health evaluation has been requested for the courtesan who went insane.* Dr. Raul Camargo, guardian of orphans, filed a request the day before yesterday with the respective judge for the unfortunate courtesan Oliva de Oliveira to undergo a mental health examination. At the boarding house on Gomes Freire Avenue, owned by Thereza Bertelli, Oliva suffered a violent episode of madness after using cocaine. The guardian also requested the appointment of a legal custodian, as the victim owned assets such as jewelry and other valuables.

A strong scene of social control is evident in this note, as the woman—following a mental collapse caused by drug abuse—is placed under legal guardianship. The pejorative term *mundana* (literally, "worldly woman") is a euphemism implying that she "belongs to the world," and is often used to refer to women deemed morally disreputable. Thus, the note reflects not only control over her body and possessions, but also highlights issues of social class, as she lived in a boarding house—a detail often associated with lower-income or marginalized women. The legal custodian, typically a male figure, underscores the patriarchal belief that women were less than fully autonomous individuals, incapable of exercising their civil rights without male oversight.

Another important aspect is the way Oliva's madness is narrated. Her cocaine use is directly linked to a "violent episode of madness," reinforcing a moralizing discourse that pathologizes female deviance. There is no inquiry into the conditions that may have led to her addiction—no attention to her social circumstances, emotional struggles, or psychological distress. Instead, the focus is placed squarely on the supposed moral threat she embodies, reducing her to a cautionary tale. In *Enervadas*, Chrysanthème's narrator even treats male guardianship with irony and sarcasm, particularly when referring to Margarida's husband, subtly critiquing the pervasive male control over women's lives:

> I had seen her husband twice—a magnificent young man of thirty: strong, rosy-cheeked, and hardworking, like a true man. Whenever we spoke of him, Margarida would say, "You can't imagine how cheerful and well-balanced Carlos is! Around you, though, he comes off as shy and awkward—but he's not like that at all. It's just that all you talk about are love affairs, cocaine, tangos, and illnesses…" I laughed like a madwoman at the idea that we could possibly intimidate my friend's robust husband.. (Chrysanthème 35-36)[8]

Carlos is initially described as strong and hardworking, "like a true man"—a phrase that may appear complimentary but is laced with irony, critiquing the idealized male stereotype. The sarcasm becomes more evident when she describes his "shyness and awkwardness" as signs that he is actually intimidated by the group of women, directly contradicting his supposedly masculine persona. At the same time, Margarida expresses disapproval of her friends' freedom in their conversations, especially criticizing the fact that "all they talk about is love affairs, cocaine, tangos, and illnesses."

Over the course of the narrative, Lúcia marries Júlio, but they eventually separate, leading her to abandon any belief in the romantic ideal of marriage. After the separation, she quickly engages in relationships with other men, eventually forming a more stable bond with Roberto: "Roberto Toledo, the most famous criminal lawyer, offered me his love, and I accepted it. However, his strong and observant nature did not bend to my control" (Chrysanthème, 94)[9].

Ironically, once involved with Roberto, Lúcia begins to change her behavior and discourse. The man actively tries to "cure" her, and the narrator—who had earlier claimed her identity as an *enervada* with conviction—now yields to Roberto's authority, expressing a desire for submission and healing. Roberto takes on a mentoring role, treating Lúcia as though she is incapable of managing her own life and must be guided back to health. This dynamic reflects the patriarchal logic established earlier in the narrative, where female autonomy is denied and male control is framed as both necessary and benevolent. The controller–controlled relationship becomes synonymous with love and happiness within the heteronormative model of the time.

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[8] "Tu não podes avaliar como Carlos é alegre e equilibrado! Aqui, na companhia de vocês, ele parece tímido e acanhado, quando não o é nunca. Mas também vocês só falam em amores, em cocaínas, em tangos, em moléstias…"
Eu ria-me como uma perdida ao ver que metíamos medo ao robusto marido da minha amiga.

[9] Roberto Toledo, o mais famoso advogado criminalista, ofereceu-me o seu amor e eu o aceitei. Entretanto, essa natureza forte e observadora não se curvou ao meu governo.

Lúcia, who once mocked Margarida's husband for being "strong like a real man," now finds herself in a similar position to her friend, performing what was then considered ideal feminine behavior in relation to a man. As she declares: *"I want to love him, it is necessary that I love him, that I submit to his rule, that I bend to his power as a man. I will silence this damn psychology that nullifies all the good efforts that arise in me, and I will become a normal creature, a happy woman"* (Chrysanthème, 108)[10].

Final Considerations

By the final pages of the novel, Lúcia has abandoned cocaine and morphine and is no longer in contact with her former friends—all at Roberto's initiative. In one of the concluding scenes, he forbids Maria Helena from visiting her, and Lúcia accepts this decision without resistance. The tone of the narrative shifts dramatically, becoming almost the opposite of what it had been at the beginning. The rebellious stance that once rejected moral and social conventions now gives way to the glorification of those very norms. What had seemed a critique of patriarchal expectations is reconfigured into a satire of conformity, revealing the deep tensions between autonomy, desire, and societal control in the portrayal of femininity:

> I adored Roberto. I lived in ecstasy in his arms—submissive to his will—with the languor of a favored sultana and the devotion of a saint. He appeared delighted, making plans and issuing commands, fully assuming the role of the male conqueror of the female. And I always obeyed him, radiant in my duty to satisfy his desires, to yield to his decrees, to bow before his sovereignty.. (Chrysanthème 112)[11]

The image of the "male conqueror of the female" evokes an animalistic dimension, rooted in the biological realm and the discourse of the natural sciences. In this sense, the passage encapsulates the broader social and ideological constructions of the period, in which

[10] Quero amá-lo, é necessário que eu o ame, que me sujeite ao seu domínio, que me curve ao seu poder de homem. Farei calar a essa maldita psicologia que inutiliza todos os bons esforços que surgem em mim e tornar-me-ei uma criatura normal, uma mulher feliz.

[11] Adorei Roberto, vivi extasiada nos seus braços, submissa à sua vontade, numa languidez de sultana favorita, numa devoção de beata. Ele mostrava-se encantado, fazendo projetos, ditando ordens, no seu papel de macho vencedor de
fêmea. E eu obedecia-lhe sempre, radiosa de ser obrigada a satisfazer-lhe os desejos, a dobrar-me aos seus decretos, a curvar-me diante de sua soberania.

scientism and medical discourse—shaped by biological determinism—functioned as foundational pillars of social order.

In conclusion, both the novel and the newspaper clippings can be understood as *social symbolic acts* of their time, in Fredric Jameson's terms. The first interpretive framework, that of political history, appears in the tensions and contradictions represented in both sources. The second framework, centered on social structures and transformations, emerges particularly in relation to shifting roles of women in social and political life. In the novel, the narrator's initial sarcasm challenges bourgeois and patriarchal norms, exposing the fragility of idealized masculinity and the mechanisms of control imposed on women. However, this defiance gradually dissolves when the narrator meets Roberto. She ultimately conforms to the societal norms she once ridiculed, entering into a relationship in which he asserts authority over her, demanding she abandon her friendships and personal freedom.

The newspaper reports reinforce these same norms, especially by exposing and shaming women who attempted to escape the constraints imposed on them by society. While the male users of drugs are protected by anonymity, the women are identified, scrutinized, and condemned with moralizing and punitive language. This double standard reveals how deeply gendered the social hierarchy of early 20th-century Brazil was: women's behavior was rigidly controlled and linked to family honor, while men's transgressions were met with leniency. Journalistic discourse thus not only enforced moral expectations but also perpetuated gender and class inequalities, shielding the powerful while criminalizing and marginalizing the vulnerable.

Jameson's third framework—the historical horizon—invites us to consider not only the gendered dynamics at play, but also the stark economic disparities of the time. In the novel, this is reflected in the figure of the nameless Black maid, whose anonymity signals her invisibility in the social order. In the newspaper clipping (figure 3), a Black prostitute is publicly exposed and shamed, underlining the racialized and classed dimensions of moral surveillance and punishment.

The interplay between these three frameworks is embodied in the ambivalent trajectory of the narrator, who first adopts sarcasm as a mode of resistance but ultimately surrenders to the very structures she critiques. This radical shift suggests the immense power of dominant social norms to absorb and neutralize dissent. The *political unconscious* of the novel, when analyzed in conjunction with the newspaper clippings, reveals the immense difficulty of subverting the status quo in a conservative society. It leaves us with a haunting

question: what options were truly available to women at the time? Were they destined to conform, like Lúcia, or risk death and social annihilation, as the clippings imply?

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