

Saramago for Beginners: Reflections on Teaching “Coisas” as an Introduction to Saramaguian Dystopia, Allegory, and Political Critique

ABSTRACT: This essay offers a rationale and methodology for introducing students to the fiction of José Saramago through a lesser-known text: his short story “Coisas,” from the collection *Objecto quase* (1978), which was taught to first-year undergraduate students at the University of Nottingham in 2019 and 2020. The article begins by justifying the inclusion of Saramago’s work—and, specifically, the short story in question—on an undergraduate Lusophone studies syllabus. It is argued that “Coisas” concisely encapsulates Saramago’s key literary themes in approachable and easily digestible prose, while containing both contextually specific and universally relevant allusions within a form and genre likely to appeal to young adults. Second, the essay outlines and critically reflects upon the lesson plans and pedagogical strategies used to teach this narrative in previous years, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Finally, the article suggests some further methods for teaching “Coisas” to Lusophone studies undergraduates and contemplates other pedagogical contexts in which Saramago’s short story might be deployed successfully in the future.

KEYWORDS: José Saramago; short story; pedagogy; dystopia; allegory

RESUMO: Este ensaio propõe uma justificação e uma metodologia pedagógica relativamente ao ensino introdutório à obra ficcional de José Saramago, através de um texto pouco conhecido: o conto “Coisas,” da colectânea *Objecto quase* (1978), que foi analisado com estudantes de primeiro ano na Universidade de Nottingham (2019–20). Em primeiro lugar, o artigo problematiza a inclusão da obra de Saramago no programa de uma disciplina de Estudos Lusófonos, com especial ênfase no conto em questão. Defende-se que “Coisas” resume, de forma relevante, algumas das principais questões da obra de Saramago através de uma prosa acessível, e que esta narrativa distópica e alegórica alude tanto a contextos específicos como a circunstâncias universais, utilizando um género literário capaz de instigar jovens adultos. Em segundo lugar, o artigo propõe uma

reflexão crítica sobre as estratégias e planos pedagógicos utilizados para ensinar este conto durante a pandemia de COVID-19, e antes dela. Em último lugar, apresentam-se modelos alternativos para ensinar “Coisas” em aulas do ensino universitário na área de Estudos Lusófonos, assim como noutros contextos pedagógicos nos quais se poderia ensinar esta narrativa saramaguiana no futuro.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: José Saramago; o conto; pedagogia; distopia; alegoria

In many cases, our best teaching ideas only come to us *after* the class in question.¹ Having taught José Saramago’s “Coisas” to Lusophone studies undergraduates in 2019 and 2020, and having been inspired by the tale of an English literature professor who declined to turn up twice for his own lecture on Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, only when sitting down to write this article did it occur to me how my ideal class would begin. First, I would deliberately snag my hand on the door on the way into the seminar room and complain loudly about the gash that the door had left on my palm. I would then attempt to cover it with an adhesive bandage, which would keep falling off and disappearing. Meanwhile, while setting up the teaching equipment, I would pretend to lose all manner of whiteboard markers, devices, and implements, lament the seemingly faulty technology that appeared to “have a mind of its own,” and develop an increasing sense of panic at this unexplained situation, openly contemplating whether to call for help. To those students who had dutifully read Saramago’s tale of malfunctioning and rebellious “objectos, utensílios, máquinas e instalações,” the artificiality of my performance would eventually become clear (and my attempt at humor would be appreciated), while those who had not yet read the short story would begin to feel the unease and sense of impending crisis that the narrative engenders. If executed convincingly, it would be a way of getting under the skin of this text or, at the very least, securing the hungover students’ attention early on a Monday morning—or late on a Friday afternoon.

It is through precisely this kind of pedagogical exercise—of transporting a literary text into students’ consciousness and into their reality—that a universally relevant and acclaimed author like José Saramago (1922–2010) can be appreciated and understood. Amid much celebration of the author’s centenary, this is a particularly pertinent moment for evaluating how (and why) Saramago’s fiction can be an effective pedagogical tool for teaching Lusophone literature, Portuguese history, and broader political, social, or philosophical questions.

Accordingly, this article will draw upon my experience of having taught the short story “Coisas” to first-year undergraduates at the University of Nottingham during the 2018–19 and 2020–21 academic years.² First, this article will discuss why Saramago’s work (and more specifically “Coisas”) should be taught to Portuguese and Lusophone studies undergraduates (or, indeed, outside of that discipline), outlining the potential pedagogical advantages and challenges that this text presents. Second, I shall focus on *how* this short story can be taught, emphasizing the key themes that can be explored, the allusions that may come up in class, and the opportunities for close analysis that the narrative offers. Third, I will consider how my template for teaching “Coisas” might be improved and developed in the future—and the ways in which others might wish to adapt this model. Above all, this article shall demonstrate the multiple educational uses and consciousness-raising potential of a lesser-known short story by a globally renowned and appreciated author.

At the outset, it should be recognized that Saramago’s literature appears (or has appeared) on the syllabi of numerous educational institutions and organizations, from the Portuguese Plano Nacional de Leitura for secondary school students, to British undergraduate degree programs in such institutions as Queen Mary University of London (QMUL 2020) and the University of Cambridge (University of Cambridge 2017), to sociology courses in Tel Aviv (Ben-Moshe 2006). The prevalence of the author’s writings within Portuguese and international courses of study is, of course, not a surprise, given the wide circulation of translations of Saramago’s novels,³ the cinematic adaptation of his works by acclaimed directors,⁴ and the global recognition and stature awarded to him following his attainment of the 1998 Nobel Prize for Literature. Nonetheless, in certain cases (the Plano Nacional de Leitura in particular), students might legitimately question whether the inclusion of a given Saramago novel is motivated by a concern with canonicity rather than by a clear pedagogical rationale, particularly when it appears alongside “canonical” Portuguese texts by the likes of Fernando Pessoa, Eça de Queiroz, and others.

In truth, such an insistence on the literary “canon” in cultural studies syllabi gets to the heart of a key debate in Western educational philosophy over multiple decades: the relative importance of teaching *knowledge* as opposed to *skills*. The influence of American pedagogist E. D. Hirsch Jr. looms large in this debate; since the 1980s, Hirsch has repeatedly extolled the virtues of “cultural literacy” (1987, xiii) and emphasized the facts, knowledge, and works that children

and young people supposedly “need to know” in order to participate and succeed within a shared culture (7–18).⁵ Yet proponents of “skills-based” learning, such as John Passmore, have critiqued the “drilling” of children in “stock responses,” decrying such practices as a kind of “indoctrination” (Passmore 1972, 416). Indeed, Hirsch’s “cultural literacy” approach can be seen as problematic on several counts: not only does it ignore the power differentials that inform the selection and prioritization of “essential” knowledge and the construction of a cultural canon (see Husbands 2015, 49), but it also risks championing canonicity for canonicity’s sake, with scant regard for literature that, even if less well known than the so-called classics, could help a young person develop their critical acumen and close analysis skills in a more significant and systematic manner. In the UK context, tensions between the two approaches above have characterized attitudes toward educational and curriculum development in recent years, with Hirsch’s focus on minimizing “knowledge gaps” having captivated right-of-center educational policy since 2010 (see Gibb 2015, 12–20), particularly where secondary education (and syllabus development) is concerned. With regard to higher education, the opposite appears to be the case, on account of moves toward “decolonizing” arts and humanities curricula in favor of more diverse producers of culture and epistemologies.⁶

In light of these concerns, educators responsible for selecting, designing, and delivering undergraduate-level cultural content—for example, in an Introduction to Lusophone Societies and Cultures module—may be faced with several (and possibly conflicting) expectations. While there is potential pressure from government bodies and agencies to offer a “canonical” program comprising key authors, texts, or elements of “cultural literacy,” other stakeholders (e.g., socially conscious students, departmental colleagues, institutional Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion officers) may well request a pedagogical justification or rationale for selecting a text by a white, male, heterosexual author from continental Portugal, such as Saramago, or Eça de Queiroz. Furthermore, it might be stipulated that the Module Handbook should explain the text’s inclusion to the enrolled students, relative to the module’s other content, key themes, and broader sociopolitical factors. On this basis, “Coisas,” from Saramago’s short fiction collection *Objecto quase* (1978), would be an acceptable and desirable object of study, for reasons that I shall outline presently.

Why Saramago? Why “Coisas”?

In some ways, the plot of “Coisas” is deceptively simple: it depicts a dystopian, futuristic, and spatially nondescript city in which everyday objects, tools, furniture, and even entire buildings (which come to be known collectively as “objectos, utensílios, máquinas e instalações,” or “oumis” [Saramago 1991, 566]) are disappearing, malfunctioning, and/or attacking citizens with an increasing intensity, leading to a draconian response on the part of the “governo” that controls this diegetic environment. Through a third-person narrator, the short story follows the trajectory of an unnamed single “funcionário” (civil servant),⁷ who is injured by a door at the beginning of the narrative. His open wound slowly enlarges, bleeds, and festers. When the *governo* implements numerous authoritarian policies in order to combat the rebellious *oumis*, the *funcionário* both participates in this political repression (by informing on suspicious-looking fellow citizens) and is himself a victim of it, particularly when the authorities demand that each citizen clearly display the letter tattooed on their hand, a letter designed to denote their “category” in this highly stratified dystopian society. As the *funcionário*’s injury worsens and he is unable to “show his hand,” he is forced to hide in the shadows and avoid the police and other residents. He returns to fully supporting the *governo* when the “mostre a mão” (585) requirement is lifted, and the authorities evacuate the city so that it can be bombarded. When the *funcionário* seeks a high vantage point from which he can triumphantly view the bombardment, he spots a naked man and woman hiding in a forest, who strangle him before he can report them as *oumis* (592). The narrative concludes when the city disappears—just before being fired upon—and a succession of naked men and women (now exposed as “coisas”) emerge from the forest as a new, bright day dawns. The concluding sentiment is one of hope and rebirth, when the fugitive “things” remark: “Agora é preciso reconstruir tudo. . . . Não voltarão os homens a ser postos no lugar das coisas” (593).

I was first introduced to this text during my MA course at the University of Porto, in the *Ficção do século XX* module taught by Pedro Eiras in 2016,⁸ and was struck by the malleability of the short story and the multiple readings that it offered. While this narrative corresponds to the fantasy, science fiction (H. Costa 1997, 334–35), and dystopian genres (Cuadrado 2007, 47), it is a clear use of dystopia as “social criticism” (for instance, of extant political regimes), as outlined by M. Keith Booker (1994). Given the circumstances of twentieth-century Portugal, particularly under the 1933–74 *Estado Novo* dictatorship primarily led by António de Oliveira Salazar, several allusions spring to mind when

examining “Coisas”: the authority exercised by the “*polícia de segurança industrial interna (psii)*” (Saramago 1991, 573), which is suspiciously close to the dictatorial regime’s *Polícia Internacional de Defesa do Estado [PIDE]*; the *funcionário*’s gleeful collaboration with the city authorities (“*Cumpridor, disso me gabo. É preciso ajudar o governo*” [574–75]), which alludes to the role of informers/“*bufos*” in combating anti-Salazarist opposition (Gallagher 1979, 387); the use of government-run media and propaganda to ensure social control (“[*O funcionário*] [d]eixou-se fixar a olhar, distraidamente, como hipnotizado pela fixidez da imagem” [Saramago 1991, 565]); and the rebellion of *oumis*, which mirrors antidictatorial resistance prior to the 1974 Carnation Revolution (Siqueira 2018, 121).

Simultaneously, these references to “living under dictatorship” (Sabine 2013) are complemented by “the story’s use of symbolism and allegory” to denounce the *Estado Novo*’s 1961–74 Colonial Wars against revolutionary insurgents in Portugal’s African colonies (Sabine 2011, 49). Specifically, there are multiple references to mobilization, military offensives, and total war, “[a] guerra sem quartel” (Saramago 1991, 573), while other motifs can be read as a critique of key aspects of the twentieth-century Portuguese empire. In particular, the hierarchy of letters tattooed on these fictional citizens’ palms (with the possibility of advancement for “conformers”) gestures toward the prevalence of racial categorization in Portugal’s African colonies: one is reminded of the *Estatuto do Indígena* governing human rights from 1926 onward, which allowed an African native “*indígena*” to attain “*assimilado*” status if they completed a series of tests and requirements established by the Portuguese authorities.

These characteristics of “Coisas” should, in themselves, be reason enough to include the short story as a set text on a first-year undergraduate “survey” module or on a more in-depth second-year module on Lusophone literary/cultural production. Having been penned by Portugal’s only Nobel Prize-winning author to date, this narrative would satisfy those championing literary “canonicity,” while the anticolonial (indeed, antiracist) implications of the short story allow it to be examined in the light of “decolonizing” pedagogical practices. At the same time, in studying this narrative, the reader is provided with highly memorable visual cues for key elements of Portuguese political and colonial history, which in turn constitute an essential part of many Portuguese/Lusophone studies undergraduate degree curricula.

Moreover, Saramago’s narrative would also appeal to advocates of “skills-based” literature teaching, given the rich and complex layers of analysis that can

be deployed, thereby allowing readers to construct their own individual meanings and interpretations within a seminar setting. In fact, to some degree “Coisas” chronicles the development of not only a generic dictatorial system (which, in any case, appears to predate the beginning of the diegesis) but also a “totalitarian bureaucracy, with a more complete understanding of the meaning of absolute power” (Arendt 2017, 320), featuring a protagonist reminiscent of “the inhabitants of a totalitarian country . . . who can only be executioners or victims of its inherent law” (615).⁹ Furthermore, the fictional *governo*’s sudden implementation of strict social control measures (despite already appearing to be a somewhat authoritarian regime) can be read in light of what Giorgio Agamben has termed “the state of exception”: “a threshold of indeterminacy between democracy and absolutism” (Agamben 2005, 2–3), which establishes “a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens” (2). The elements of (mutual) surveillance alluded to in “Coisas” also correspond somewhat to Michel Foucault’s comments on a “panopticism” that is “polyvalent in its applications,” a “generalized surveillance,” and the development of a twentieth-century “disciplinary society” (Foucault 1995, 206–7). These are just some of the philosophical issues that “Coisas” takes up; in-class discussions with engaged students would surely bring more topics to the fore.

As a result, this short narrative resonates with a multitude of political systems and circumstances from the past century and from across the globe. As Ana Márcia Alves Siqueira has noted, for instance, the tattooing of letters onto each citizen’s palm (as if they were “things”) closely resembles the Jewish lapel star and the treatment of concentration camp victims under Nazi rule, while the imagery of extended arms parading through the city’s streets (“as pessoas . . . passavam umas pelas outras, de braço estendido, dobrando a mão pelo pulso, para cima” [Saramago 1991, 577–78]) is a clear evocation of Fascist (or Nazi) iconography (Siqueira 2018, 120). Simultaneously, the fictional authorities’ command to citizens to “mostr[a]r a mão” or their “cartão identificativo” (Saramago 1991, 558) holds a particular relevance in the increasingly “papers please”-oriented societies of western Europe. While a multitude of European democracies (including Portugal) instruct residents to carry identification cards when out in public, in the UK, police “stop and search” powers have come under increasing political scrutiny, and bureaucratic documents such as passports or residence permits must now be shown before beginning work, renting a home, or using health services (see Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants 2022).

Inevitably, the issue of state control and overreach recalls a recent, unprecedented, and all-encompassing crisis that everyone will remember: the COVID-19 pandemic (2019–present). While the severity of government-mandated lockdowns and quarantines has clearly varied from country to country, images of social control measures, curfews, and personal documents justifying one’s presence are both instantly recognizable to all readers and recur throughout Saramago’s narrative. Government COVID messaging, particularly in the British case, relates strongly to the fictional *governo’s* statement that “Os cidadãos utentes devem recusar o boato, o empolamento, a manipulação” (Saramago 1991, 566–67)—an appeal against “fake news”—and the authorities’ rapidly shifting slogans (“Dadas as circunstâncias, e tendo-se revelado infrutífera a palavra de ordem ‘vigilância e mão aberta,’ é essa palavra de ordem substituída por esta outra: vigiar e atacar” [588]), are not far removed from the English government’s oscillation between instructing residents to “Stay Home, Protect the NHS, Save Lives” and to “Stay Alert, Control the Virus, Save Lives” (Hickman 2020; Degun 2021).

The real-world allusions above are all ways in which “Coisas” might be interpreted and appreciated by young adults, but the question remains: Why should this short story be selected for teaching over any other Saramaguian narrative? Surely more specific details of twentieth-century Portuguese history can be gleaned from *Levantado do chão* (1980), whereas more sustained and systematized metaphors for human fragility and evil are articulated in Saramago’s post-1990 novels like *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (1995)?¹⁰ One justification lies in the potential of this particular narrative to encapsulate both the historical and allegorical “phases” of Saramago’s career. If, as Perfecto E. Cuadrado claims, the short stories of *Objecto quase* represent incipient harbingers of the author’s later novels and should therefore not be regarded as a minor footnote in Saramago’s work (Cuadrado 2007, 43), “Coisas” is perhaps the most effective illustration of his entire body of literature, contained within fewer than forty pages of prose (Saramago 1991, 555–93).¹¹

Another compelling reason to adopt “Coisas” as teaching material lies in its form and genre, which are highly likely to appeal to teenagers and young adults. Multiple scholars contend that “[m]ore than longer prose, drama, or poetry, the short story is an eminently teachable genre” relative to longer prose, which “can be unwieldy, and discussion can lose the level of scrutiny that truly builds critical acumen” (Hamilton and Kratzke 1999, xii). This dynamic is particularly relevant

to Saramago's novels from 1980 onward, in which, as the translator Margaret Jull Costa has openly admitted, "[t]he sheer density of the words on the page can prove exhausting, for both paragraphs and sentences can be immensely long. It is very easy, at first, to lose one's way not just in the long sentences, but also in the page itself" (M. Costa 1999, 211). In "Coisas," however, the prose is clear, concise, and accessible, with conventional Portuguese speech markers and paragraphing, thereby assisting with Portuguese-language learning for beginners or intermediate students (should educators choose to work with the original text).¹² Moreover, it has been suggested that "[the short story's] world flicker[s] with multiple and changing perspectives that are perfect for the classroom"—qualities that "Coisas" certainly offers—while (generally) avoiding "didacticism and self-indulgence" (Hamilton and Kratzke 1999, xii), as Saramago's narrative also avoids.

The positioning of "Coisas" within the dystopian literary genre is also a significant advantage in terms of inciting student interest. As Michael Arthur Soares convincingly outlines, one of the virtues of traditional "dystopian" narratives—such as George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)—is that they can be "tied to the [contemporary] headlines" and related to real-life "Orwellian Spaces" that adolescents and young adults may have experienced firsthand, meaning that such students are already "primed" for nightmarish scenarios within such literary works (Soares 2020, 75–78).¹³ Moreover, even if *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), and Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451* (1953) are not necessarily secondary school-level set texts or commonly recognized cultural references for many young adults, dystopian fictional worlds are increasingly consumed by teenage readers (Hill 2012, 99). This trend is evidenced, for instance, by the success of the *Hunger Games* novel series (2008–20), which, among other narratives designed for a teen audience, has the potential to provoke and influence the political engagement and development of young adults (see Jones and Paris 2018; Connors 2021). One can also point to the success of the *Hunger Games* (2012–present) film franchise and the highly acclaimed video game *The Last of Us* (2013–present)—sequels have been released and a new game is in development as proof that popular culture (and, specifically, youth culture) is highly attuned to the "dystopian impulse" (Booker 1994). On this basis, "Coisas" has a high probability of grabbing the attention of undergraduates aged eighteen to twenty-two.

Finally, there are ethical considerations that come to bear on the selection of this specific Saramaguian text. In particular, is it fair and appropriate to expect a student's first (and potentially only) experience of reading this author in an

educational environment to be a long, linguistically challenging, and structurally complex novel, often laden with complicated contextual references and intertextuality that a new reader may find somewhat opaque?¹⁴ Such an approach may be acceptable for literature-heavy syllabi or content-oriented curricula, but for first-year “survey modules” or pure language classes, this strategy may alienate students rather than generate passion or enhance close analysis skills. Therefore, working with a shorter and more accessible narrative by this author is likely to improve student confidence as well as their critical acumen, and it works to “prepare the ground” for more complex literary texts by Saramago (or indeed by any other Lusophone writer).

As a result, “Coisas” is an eminently accessible, relevant, and nondiscriminatory object of study. It should be seriously considered for inclusion within Lusophone literature/culture modules, not because it is the work of a “canonical” or “great” author—in fact, it is generally viewed as rather peripheral within Saramago’s *œuvre*—but because it has innate literary qualities that make it an ideal introduction to the Nobel Prize winner’s fiction. Through its very form, genre, plot, setting, and themes, this short story helps the student reader understand pertinent Portuguese and international issues, develop their close reading skills, and debate the narrative’s continuing relevance in multiple political and social fields.

How to Teach Saramago through “Coisas”

At this juncture, I shall reflect on how I have taught “Coisas” at Nottingham in previous years, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic (March 2019 and December 2020). Before my 2019 class, my brief was to design and deliver a class for a Lusophone studies “survey module” that would sit comfortably alongside such topics as Portugal’s Colonial Wars, post-Civil War Angolan cinema, and post-independence Mozambican literature. Fortunately, the format of this module involved a two-hour class on each topic, allowing for content delivery and seminar discussion within the space of the same class; as indicated earlier, a short story such as “Coisas” would be much more effectively taught in a seminar than in a lecture, given the importance of student reactions and group discussion for joint construction of meaning.

Prior to the class, several pedagogical guides helped me develop this teaching material. A group of Brazilian scholars has proposed an interdisciplinary, “horizontal,” and “rhizomatic” approach to teaching Saramago’s work, especially in countries where it is less readily recognized (Lacowicz et al. 2009, 1–11).

Accordingly, my lesson plan made explicit links between Saramago's immediate context (dictatorial Portugal) and the political, social, and economic conditions of twenty-first-century Britain. More broadly, Gillian Lazar's remarks in *Literature and Language Teaching* (1993) were extremely helpful, despite the fact that my intention for this first-year class was to use Giovanni Pontiero's English translation rather than the Portuguese original.¹⁵ Lazar's thoughts on text selection (that the text should be "relevant to the students' own society," short enough to be covered in detail, and aligned with other objects of study on the syllabus [1993, 55–62]) assuaged my initial doubts regarding the narrative's appropriateness for this module. Moreover, Lazar's outline of common student issues with short stories—"inadequate reading strategies"; lack of "confidence to make own interpretations"; "don't read much in own language"; and difficulties in "following the plot" and "understanding the characters" (76)—was instrumental in my development of an engaging and eye-opening class on "Coisas."

Accordingly, the session began with a focus on *comprehension*. A five-minute "buzz group" activity involved three different tasks allocated to classroom groups. First, Group A was asked to summarize the short story's plot in bullet points, thereby ensuring a base level of understanding (in line with Lazar's suggestion [85]). Group B was tasked with outlining the relationship between the *funcionário* and the *governo* throughout the narrative and the way in which it evolves. Group C was asked to choose the literary genre of the story and their reasons for that choice. Further comprehension questions followed: What could the "objectos, utensílios, máquinas e instalações" represent? What about their rebellion? What are we to make of the developing injury on the *funcionário*'s hand? Finally, how are we supposed to interpret the ending?

Subsequently, the seminar developed into a general outline of the dystopian genre, including examples of dystopias in literature, film, and video games, their key characteristics, and the appearance of those elements within "Coisas." Then, with specific reference to the "Oceania" regime of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, I drew parallels between the rabid anger that Saramago's *governo* incites within its citizens ("Sentiu uma grande fúria. Nenhum medo, apenas uma grande e saudável fúria. Ódio. Uma raiva de matar" [Saramago 1991, 589]) and the "two minutes' hate" that appears in Michael Radford's cinematic adaptation of Orwell's novel (Radford 1984)—a particularly jolting experience for students attending a Monday-morning class. I also established a connection between the repeated use of acronyms throughout Saramago's narrative ("serviço médico [sm]"; "nota

oficiosa do governo [nog]” [Saramago 1991, 555–64]) and Oceania’s invention of the “Newspeak” language, using an explanatory video to make this allusion explicit (Zeng 2017).

Once the productive avenues of this discussion of dystopian texts had been exhausted, I shifted the class’s focus toward social criticism, beginning with a citation from Booker’s study regarding the use of “defamiliarization” within “spatially or temporally distant settings” (Booker 1994, 19) as a strategy for critiquing extreme-left and far-right dictatorial (or totalitarian) regimes. This in turn led to the question of “allegory,” for which I offered the Dictionary.com (2022) definition: “a representation of an abstract or spiritual meaning through concrete or material forms; figurative treatment of one subject under the guise of another.” Armed with this information, the students began to explore the allegorical possibilities of “Coisas,” and I started the discussion by outlining the links between Saramago’s diegetic environment and the Salazarist dictatorship, its Colonial Wars, and resistance to that repressive regime. Students were then invited to contemplate what other dictatorial precedents might come to mind when reading this short story, with a particular focus on imagery pertaining to militaristic and fascist behavior. Finally, I asked students to consider examples of surveillance, bureaucracy, and creeping authoritarianism in ostensibly democratic contemporary contexts.

In my critical self-reflections after this class had taken place, I concluded that several components—such as the initial comprehension activities—had been rather successful, as had my overview of dystopian cultural production and the exploration of how “Coisas” operated within this paradigm. What I believed to have been less effective, however, was the discussion of authoritarian regimes and their relationship to the short story’s diegetic environment: it had perhaps been unreasonable to expect that first-year undergraduates, with a range of different module choices, would come to the class armed with extensive knowledge of the Portuguese dictatorship or other examples of nondemocratic governments. The problem still remained, though, of how to link the short story’s content and themes to contemporary experiences and make the narrative “relevant to the students’ own society” (Lazar 1993, 62) in order to ensure their engagement with this object of study.

As it happened, the arrival of COVID-19 in the UK in early 2020 meant that future readers of “Coisas” would automatically develop firsthand knowledge of quarantines, curfews, suspended rights, and (temporarily) restricted liberties.

Therefore, my second attempt at teaching Saramago's narrative in December 2020—which, rather aptly, took place online during a national lockdown—incorporated current events into the debate on the text's ongoing relevance. Specifically, while this class retained the basic format and order of its March 2019 iteration, it also dedicated considerable attention to the COVID-19 global public health emergency, likening the text's evocation of crisis, hysteria, policing measures, and government messaging to real-life examples of the pandemic's impact on contemporary societies. Ultimately, this change was a significant improvement on my previous lesson plan: it provided a timely opportunity for students to “read literature cross-culturally” and to “compare their own experiences with the ones in the text” (Lazar 1993, 43–62), thereby increasing their interest and classroom participation.

Overall, the focus of this class was always on the specific text and the meanings that it could generate rather than on the “status” of the author and his place in the national/international canon. An outline of Saramago's literary career and public persona was included (and may have helped some students), but upon reflection, it was perhaps slightly peripheral to the subsequent analysis and discussion, given the avenues for critical analysis and philosophical/ethical reflection that “Coisas” offers *regardless* of who wrote it. The essential message that I sought to impart was that a seemingly ambiguous and nonspecific narrative such as this one could offer a historically and geographically particular reading (Salazarist Portugal), as well as broader and more imaginative interpretations, if the appropriate literary analysis tools (e.g., close reading strategies, attention to allegory) were deployed effectively. This class model can easily be adapted, improved, and fine-tuned in accordance with student, institutional, and/or stakeholder desires and the sociopolitical circumstances of a given time or place. In the section that follows, I offer some tentative suggestions.

“Coisas” in the Future: Conclusions and Suggestions

Throughout this article, I have aimed to convince the reader of the significant benefits attached to introducing students of Lusophone culture to José Saramago through close analysis of a singular, targeted short story, in contrast to the conventional pedagogical approach involving one of his renowned novels. I have defended the inclusion of “Coisas” in university syllabi on the basis of its accessibility, its malleability, and its intense dialogue with the sociopolitical conditions of twentieth-century Portugal (and more broadly). I have proposed a potential

template for teaching this short story within a seminar environment, with an emphasis on genre recognition, close critical analysis, and the association of narrative with concrete lived experience (including that of ongoing circumstances).

In what other contexts could this text be taught? As mentioned earlier, “Coisas” certainly lends itself to a first-year “survey” module (in which it would likely be taught in translation) or to a Year 2 / Year 3 literary and cultural studies module (where it could be prescribed in the original Portuguese to assist with language development). Moreover, it could be an extremely valuable object of study within an undergraduate or postgraduate comparative literature module—where, again, the translation could be deployed—or even in a theatrical adaptation, in which the “dramatic performance” of “Coisas” imagined at the beginning of this article could finally come to fruition. It could also appear in educational contexts outside of the university sector: at the risk of angering “cultural literacy” purists in the Portuguese education system, I would advocate for this narrative to be placed on the Plano Nacional de Leitura in place of the current choices of *Memorial do convento* and *O ano da morte de Ricardo Reis*. In this way, Portuguese teenagers would be offered an opportunity to grapple with key Saramaguian themes through a nonthreatening, comprehensible text, thereby leading them to better appreciate Saramago’s work in later life. Finally, given the growth of Portuguese “A-level” courses in several UK secondary schools, “Coisas” could act as a language-learning tool and a catalyst for intellectual debate in Portuguese oral classes for students between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. Due to the timeless (and placeless) nature of the issues raised in this short story, a number of pedagogical opportunities present themselves.

How else might the narrative be read in a classroom setting? The answer to that question depends, of course, on what the future holds. The Russia-Ukraine war (2022–present) holds considerable affinity with the bombardments, armed conflict, and resistance described in Saramago’s text; the specter of the anti-democratic Right hovers over European nations from Hungary to Portugal; and the current Conservative UK government is determined to prohibit “noisy protests” and ship asylum seekers to Rwanda, all of which means that the warnings of dystopian (and allegorical) fiction are just as essential as they were in 1978. If narratives like “Coisas” continue to be closely analyzed, debated, and discussed, however, there is hope for humanity yet.

NOTES

No data are associated with this article.

1. I would like to thank the peer reviewers of this article for their insightful comments and to extend my gratitude to Mark Sabine, for without his support and the trust he has placed in me, this article would not exist.

2. This class on “Coisas” was designed and delivered by me in March 2019, by Mark Sabine in February 2020, and once again by me in December 2020.

3. For example, Spanish translations by Saramago’s widow, Pilar del Río, alongside English renderings by Giovanni Pontiero and Margaret Jull Costa have significantly increased awareness and consumption of his novels across Anglophone nations and in Latin America.

4. See, for instance, Fernando Meirelles’s adaptation of *Ensaio sobre a cegueira* (1995) as *Blindness* (2008).

5. See also Hirsch’s *Knowledge Deficit: Closing the Shocking Education Gap for American Children* (2006).

6. A paradigmatic example of this tendency is the “Why Is My Curriculum White” campaign, founded by students at University College London in 2014; within the Portuguese/Lusophone studies field, one can consider the “Decolonising Portuguese Studies” roundtable discussion, involving Mark Sabine, Ana Reimão, Emmanuelle Santos, and Stephanie Dennison, which took place at the 2021 Association of British and Irish Lusitanists Conference (University of Newcastle, September 17, 2021).

7. Giovanni Pontiero’s translation of this term (Saramago 2012a, 65–114).

8. I took the Mestrado de Estudos Literários, Culturais e Inter-artes course, at the Faculdade de Letras da Universidade do Porto, between 2014 and 2016. The module in question took place in 2016, with the entire *Objecto quase* collection examined in class.

9. Indeed, as Christopher Rollason has highlighted, and as I shall address presently, there is an intrinsic link between Saramago’s fiction and George Orwell’s totalitarian literary scenario (Rollason 2006, 105–20).

10. Curiously, *Cegueira*’s tale of a plague of blindness has repeatedly been compared to the COVID-19 pandemic, including in the medical journal *The Lancet* (Marchalik and Petrov 2020).

11. While other short stories in this collection offer allegorical potential and critique of extant sociopolitical circumstances (e.g., “Cadeira,” “Embargo,” and “Refluxo”), they are arguably too brief, limited in scope, or abstract to allow for detailed discussions in a seminar environment.

12. An excellent and accessible translation of *Objecto quase* (by Giovanni Pontiero) also exists, titled *The Lives of Things* (Saramago 2012a).

13. While Soares cites the constant threat of violence (particularly gun-related violence) in US schools (see Soares 2020, 76–77), his analysis is equally applicable to the current

generation of young adults, all of whom have experienced varying degrees of trauma and disruption owing to the COVID-19 pandemic.

14. This is especially true of *Levantado do chão*, which, in Margaret Jull Costa's translation, contains more than fifty footnotes to explain contextual details and literary references (Saramago 2012b).

15. That said, key quotations from the Portuguese original were examined during class alongside the translation.

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