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## Travesía Crítica

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*Estela Vieira's Analysis of Space in Nineteenth-Century  
Luso-Hispanic Novel*

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Vieira, Estela. *Interiors and Narrative: The Spatial Poetics of Machado de Assis, Eça de Queirós, and Leopoldo Alas*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP, 2013. 261 pp.

Estela Vieira's book analyzes the interior spaces of three masterpieces of the Luso-Hispanic novel of the second half of the 19th century: *La Regenta* (1884) by Leopoldo Alas (Clarín), *The Maias* (1888) by Eça de Queirós, and *Quincas Borba* (1891) by Joaquim Maria Machado de Assis.

The volume is structured in five sections: a very well documented and illuminating introduction ("Interiors and Narrative"), three main sections of analysis corresponding to the book's core ("Furnishing the novel", "Interiors and

Interiority”, and “The Discourse of Interiors”), and an epilogue (“From Voltaire’s Garden to Galdós’s Room”). This study deals with the literary production of Spain, Portugal and Brazil in 19th century.

Vieira’s introduction is subdivided into two main parts: “The Novel’s Sense of Interior” (2) and “The Novelist’s Sense of Interior” (14). In the first one, speaking on Clarín’s, Queirós’ and Machado’s work, Vieira argues that “the interior space has a rhetorical function and with significant consequences for the development of narrative and of ideas in general. These three authors collect, appraise, and include furnishings, object d’art, windows, doors (...) and foremost for fictional purposes” (3). She justifies the book’s corpus by showing why these three novels represent a culminating moment of three literary traditions, and highlights the importance of studying them in conjunction with one another.

For Vieira, Clarín, Queirós and Machado develop a similar rhetoric of space in these novels. By furnishing the interior spaces of their fictions, they pave “the way for major conceptual, ontological, and discursive changes” (4) and “examine the workings of their societies’ inherent contradictions” (5). Studies on material culture related to space issues are one of the points of departure of this book since, according to Vieira’s view, interior spaces, rooms and its furnishings express in one way or another the personality of the characters. She concludes this section by asserting that “literally furnishing the novel, authors and artists

can create spaces where memory and history coincide with the modern search for an inner life" (14).

In the second part of the introduction, *The Novelist's Sense of the Interior*, Vieira supports the idea that "Machado, Eça and Clarín reflect on the interior as a site where the individual crisis of self-definition takes place inseparably from its unique historical and cultural constellations, which are present in the materials, furnishings, and architectural design of our interior spaces" (16). This section provides interesting biographical information to show that these writers established important bonds with their own private spaces. This is a relevant fact because their characters operate in a similar way within fiction. Providing biographical information and even pictures, Estela Vieira links the actual interior spaces of Machado (17) Eça (22) and Clarín (27) with their fiction to show how those interiors act as a point of departure to create a symbolic and rhetoric style, and a semiotic language of objects for the development of both, the story and the interiority of the characters.

Part One, "Furnishing the Novel" (39), is devoted to the analysis of furniture, decorative objects and environments within the three fictions, emphasizing that "the novels also intend to convey through their representation of interiors the contradiction and complexities of their historical contexts and characters" (39). In Vieira's view, the interior spaces are epitomes of history and metaphysical concerns. This part is also divided into three sections: "The

Threshold: The Ins and Out of *Quincas Borba*" (41), "Movables and Immovables: The Legend of *The Maias*" (58), and "The Corners of the World: Inside *La Regenta*" (75).

In the first part Vieira studies how "Machado de Assis's *Quincas Borba* creates a threshold and opposing tension between interiors and exteriors which explores how the self and the mind struggle with an existence marked by enslavement" (41). It points out how the interior spaces and objects of this novel are much more than symbols, and how the interior architecture not only functions as an allegory of Brazilian modernization but also as a framework for the novel's underlying questions. This section also explores the tensions between antithetical spaces: interior spaces and their margins "to discern some of his characters most intimate experiences and explore a number of his society's most pressing contradictions" (43). It is worth noting Vieira's decision to link the peripheral location, essential in Machado's characters, with Homer's Odysseus and Penelope. In the fiction of both of these authors, the idea of having a clear center is absent, which in turn makes the characters' quest for one seem futile. This strategic configuration of center and periphery allows Machado to ask questions regarding the cultural dependence between Europe and America. Vieira's analysis makes, through *Quincas Borba* interior and peripheral spaces, an intelligent connection between national histories and individual identity stories.

The second section, “Movables and Immovables: The Legend of *The Maias*”, details how Eça de Queirós furnishes his novel to give voice to the socio-political concerns of his time. Estela Vieira shows how Eça’s abundant descriptions have symbolic functions and formal purposes, for her “Portuguese society, history, and characters can be best read and written via the art of space: its fixtures, tones, and design” (59). Vieira offers her readers an interesting analysis on the tension between mobility and stagnation within *The Maias*, making this juxtaposition a central axis of her reading. The tragic story of the Maia family is the history of Portugal’s colonial period. This parallelism opens the door to the possibility of interpreting this novel as “a narration on how colonization destroys both the colonizer and the colonized” (74). According to her argument, Vieira states that “associating immobility and progress is also a metaphor that speaks to the author’s own political engagement and disillusionment with Portugal’s status quo and future promise” (219). It is pointed out that furnishings and houses are essential elements in the novel to organize the tension between movement and immobility, and to define the novel as a historical and social critique.

In the last section, “The Corners of the World: Inside *La Regenta*”, Vieira discovers how this novel also connects interior spaces with Spain’s colonial history. Curiously, these three novels speak of the consequences of their countries’ colonial past. Vieira asserts that in *La Regenta* there is a continuous

invasion of interiors as a form of discovery. *Vetusta* seems to be a mosaic of inner parts “which narrator, characters, and readers invade and unlock” (220). As in *The Maias*, Clarín links “his narrative architectural framework to a critique of Spain’s colonial past” (220).

Also divided into three sections, Part II, “Interiors and Interiorities” (101), examines the intimate relation between characters and their rooms. The first section, “Inside the Minds and Hearts of Machado’s Characters” (102), illustrates how minor and major characters conceal important secrets in their private quarters. Vieira emphasizes that those interior spaces help Machado develop his narrators’ limitations and unreliability. Machado uses Rubião’s and Sofia’s architectural dynamics to delve into their inner worlds, and to examine gender differences. In the second section, “Eça’s Interior Decorators” (121), Vieira explores how some secondary characters act as decorators, a role that problematizes the essential dichotomy of the novel between progress and stagnation. Furthermore, Vieira exemplifies how male characters, like Carlos and Ega, use interiors as the only conduit to (mis)understand reality. Interior spaces and characters’ interiorities are interconnected in *The Maias*.

The last section, “Memory and Movement: Ana’s and Fermín’s Interiors” (138), offers great enjoyment and pleasure to the reader. Estela Vieira’s subtle analysis of Clarín’s masterpiece’s interior spaces grants a new reading of *La Regenta*. In a convincing way, this section expounds upon “the

interconnectedness between interior and exterior, individual and collective (...) shows that the inner crisis the protagonists undergo involves both selves and the societies" (138). Vieira therefore offers a clear analysis of the importance of Ana's bed or Fermín's interior body language in relation to *La Regenta's* furnished and enclosed spaces.

In the last part, subdivided into three sections and entitled "The Discourse of Interiors", Vieira uses Bakhtin's concept of *chronotope* to help explain how interior discourses turn into a symbolic and semiotic language of objects that communicate new meanings. Vieira's analysis is therefore closely related to material culture. In the first subdivision, "Machado Minimalism and the Meaning of Things" (163), Vieira addresses the author's complex and unreliable narrator to assert that Machado tries "to distract the readers from the semiotic possibilities of the settings" (222). Rubião's possessions act as a point of departure for Machado to talk about important problems of the Brazilian society of that period: slavery, social and cultural dependency, etc.

In the second section, "The Narrative Life of Eça's Furnishings" (183), Vieira explores the changes of the family mansion, Ramalhete, that she considers "a locus for the encounter of life and death, and fiction and reality" (222). Vieira analyses the strong relation between some furniture and the characters' behaviours, and the symbolic connotations that furnishings and objects have within the narrative. She concludes that "for Eça interior decoration is both an

empowering and creative narrative device capable of disguising significant political and historical subtexts" (223). The last section, "The Dramatic Effect of Clarín's Interior Architecture" (199), considers interior spaces in *La Regenta* as stages for dramatic representation. This part offers a detailed analysis of some places like the Ozores palace, Emma's bedroom and its balcony, Fortunato's private room or Rufina's yellow salon; they all are independent spaces but share important commonalities.

Vieira finishes her study with an epilogue that serves as a concise description of the whole book. To conclude this epilogue, she asserts that "[d]escription of interior decoration and architectural details in these literary traditions, far from interrupting the flow of the plot, are significant in developing the story line. In fact, rooms, furnishings, and ornamental objects drive the novels forward" (223). With this analysis, Estela Vieira provides a refreshingly new and unique reading of these three literary masterpieces.