

Vieira, Estela, *Interiors and Narrative: the Spatial Poetics of Machado de Assis, Eça de Queirós, and Leopoldo Alas*. Lanham, MD: Bucknell University Press/Rowman and Littlefield, 2013. Print.

On the one hand, Estela Vieira's *Interiors and Narrative* is a demonstration of an important factor in the history of the novel: the reality that "in the late nineteenth-century interiors are so central that it is hard to find a novel that is not fascinated with dwelling. Even novels that at a first look seem engaged with more abstract and theoretical concerns are in effect preoccupied above all with interior space" (2). On the other, it is a stimulating close reading of three canonical novels by preeminent voices of the Iberian world. The novels are *Quincas Borba* (1891) by Machado de Assis, *Os Maias* (1888) by Eça de Queirós, and *La Regenta* (1884-85) by Leopoldo Alas (Clarín).

Vieira's exposition of the concept of dwelling spaces in fiction is brief and not overly theoretical. She enlists theories as diverse as those of Aristotle, Poe, Wharton, Bachelard, Heidegger, and Benjamin to show how the house constitutes an appropriate vehicle for exploring the relationship between the self and the public, in one direction, and the self and his or her own thoughts, in the other. Vieira additionally shows that dwellings, being built, furnished or decorated, serve as figures for meta-literary commentary on the process of constructing and populating narrative. One enjoyable aspect of the introduction is that Vieira brings in visual representations of interiors, and in particular those of Vermeer, Henry and Casas (whose "Interior" attractively serves as the book cover illustration) to reinforce prior assertions about the figurative potency of room representations. Another welcome component is a brief attention to the biographies of Machado, Eça and Clarín in terms of the authors' particular interest in buildings, rooms and interior decoration.

An obvious and perhaps pedestrian way to organize the book would have been to present one chapter each on *Quincas Borba*, *Os Maias*, and *La Regenta*, analyzing the relevance of interior space in each novel. Vieira avoids such a blatant approach, instead presenting primary chapters entitled "Furnishing the Novel," "Interiors and Interiority" and "The Discourse of Interiors", each of which at different moments discusses all three novels. A possible tradeoff for

this decision is that at times the conceptual distinction among the chapters is not very evident, and the reader occasionally questions why certain themes are discussed in one chapter and not the other. But this hardly interferes with the overall excellence of Vieira's reading of the novels.

With *Quincas Borba*, the book calls special attention to the matter of thresholds, which involve the individual's interaction with society, and in particular, the tenuous engagement of individuals in the social problems of their day, such as paternalism and slavery. For example, the female protagonist, Sofia, sits in her room pondering a recent experience of adulterous attentions when a slave enters with some soup. This shows that "Sofia's dilemmas concern not only her adulterous desires but are also intertwined with society's contradictions, slavery being the foremost of these" (49). Vieira studies rising and declining motions of characters within their rooms, which suggest their personal and societal ambivalence. Interiors are shown to be figures for bringing out the concerns of their occupants' minds and hearts. Objects in the rooms appear to be stimulants for the characters' thought processes: "Machado uses the representations of interiors to ultimately explore how memory works in narrative" (106). Rooms help represent the world-views of their people; for example, Carlos Maria, enamored of comfortable interiors, ponders hiding away his new wife: "Confining her love for him is ironically a form of self-confinement and these conscious or subconscious wishes or actions reinforce the locking up of his own emotions and desires" (183).

In Eça's masterpiece, Vieira examines the important motifs of "móveis" and "imóveis" and relates them to a question of progression versus stagnation. The illustrious Maia family wants to move forward, but is held back by its historical baggage, including its despotic patriarchs and ties to the slave trade. Privileged characters, who have the means to contribute to society, instead become obsessed with furnishing their own domestic retreats. Attempts to reform the ancestral estate, Ramalhete, ironically play on the idea of renovation and decadence. Furnishings of contradictory styles and esthetics reflect the psychological contradictions of family members. "Ramalhete characterizes Carlos and Afonso and their illusions, as it does the novel's own deceptive style and form" (186).

Vieira reads *La Regenta* as a novel whose characters are burdened by the effects of Spain's colonial history of exploitation. The attempt to deal with these holdovers is carried out through a negotiation of problematic interiors. In Clarín's novel, "selfish characters are obsessed with dominating inner territories while others, such as Ana Ozores, who struggles for a kind of impossible freedom, battle to escape being imprisoned within different interiors" (75). According to the book, the Spanish novel compounds images of dark and smoky rooms, suggesting the need to penetrate such enigmatic enclosures. The spaces are at once troubling and enticing. In opposition, "generously lit interior spaces commonly reveal unpleasant incidents" (200).

Interiors and Narrative, as a whole, shows that "the subjective search for an inner life associated with modernist writing originates in the private interior as a space of retreat for both female and male characters. In this interior world, attention and weight is given to the seemingly insignificant details that communicate an existential need and historical density" (224). For its overall conceptual rigor and for the acuteness of its reading of the three important novels in question, Estela Vieira's book deserves serious attention, not just from students of the authors and their works, but also from all those interested in the question of space in literature.

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