

“THE BOHEMIAN GIRL”: A SPACE FOR MEMORIES, THE LINK BETWEEN CHARACTER AND LANDSCAPE

“A MENINA DA BOÊMIA”:
ESPAÇO DE LEMBRANÇAS, ELO ENTRE PERSONAGENS E PAISAGENS

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to analyse the short story “The Bohemian Girl” (1992) by Willa Cather, starting from the idea that a space is constructed as place of belonging to the place establishing a link between space, landscape and being human. The author identifies space as the main feature capable of producing memories. From Tavares’ (2010) perspective “localities” are not only “spaces;” they are actually places where human beings share feelings and build their own space and community. The characters that make up the story walk forth from this perspective. In this story, the author presents the path of a family of immigrants who left Bohemia to come to Nebraska. The story is an example of the American writer’s interest for nature and the landscape, features her characters faced in the new world. The narrator’s text describes the Ericson family’s space poetically. She interprets, through their memories, the relationship of the characters with the land, denoting a strong sentiment for nature. We used the theories of Borges (2009), Alves (2006-2013), Besse (2006), among others to perform our analysis. These authors have contributed to the approaching space in the narrative and to the definition and significance of geographical space in the literary text.

Keywords: space; memories; characters; landscape

Resumo: O texto objetiva analisar o conto “The Bohemian Girl” (1992), de Willa Cather, a partir da ideia que se constrói de espaço como lugar de pertencimento ao local, estabelecendo um elo entre espaço, paisagem e ser humano. A autora identifica o espaço como principal elemento capaz de provocar lembranças. Na ótica de Tavares (2010), “lugares” não são apenas “espaços” são, na verdade, locais onde o ser humano comunga sentimentos e constrói seu espaço particular e em comunidade. Nessa perspectiva, caminham as personagens que fazem parte da história. No conto, a autora apresenta a trajetória de uma família de imigrantes que saíram de Boêmia para o estado do Nebraska. O conto é exemplo do interesse da escritora norte-americana, pela natureza e pela paisagem, aspectos com os quais as suas personagens se defrontam em terras do novo mundo. O narrador do texto descreve poeticamente o espaço da família Ericson; interpreta, por meio das lembranças, a relação das personagens com a terra denotando um forte sentimento pela natureza. Para análise utilizou-se as teorias de Borges (2009), Alves (2006-2013), Besse (2006), entre outros. Os autores contribuem para a abordagem do espaço na narrativa e para a definição e significação do espaço geográfico no texto literário.

Palavras-chave: espaço; lembranças; personagens; paisagem

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this article is to analyse the short story “The Bohemian Girl” by Willa Cather, considering the physical and psychological space important features in the narrative, capable of representing the mark of man’s belonging to a place, or that through memories the characters realise that the environments which they were part of do not cease to surround their lives, even if they no longer belong to the place. This does not keep them from reconstructing them in other localities with the same commitment as before.

For this, this study is based on several theoreticians such as Borges Filho (2009), Alves (2006-2013), Besse (2000), Foucault (2001), Bachelard (1996), Meining (1979), Lins (1979), among others.

The word landscape as space, which is part of human existence, has been discussed since the nineteenth century. It must be said that landscape inspires writers who, in turn, see it as their view, their imagination and their feelings. And Cather in “The Bohemian Girl” portrays this landscape as religious space and her characters run through it and own it.

According to Besse, “the landscape is expression and, more precisely, the expression of existence.” (2006, p. 70) since the notion of landscape only develops when one lives in that space. The short story “The Bohemian Girl” confirms this feature when presenting the place experienced by the characters and because everyone values the places where they have been.

In this tale, “sometimes a landscape seems less a backdrop to the lives of its inhabitants than a curtain behind which their struggles, their marks on the landscape are no more geographic but also biographical and personal.” (BERGER, 1988 cited by COSGROVE, 1998, p. 285).

In “The Bohemian Girl,” the characters are recognized in the landscape. Each one of their histories occupies a space of memories and their relationships are constantly evolving. Although there is some resistance on the part many characters, Clara Vavrika and Nils Ericson try to rebuild their lives in another space, with memories, but in search of new paths.

Thus, it is clear that “the landscape means a way of seeing and composing the world . . .” (FEITOSA, 2010, p. 164). Willa Cather characterizes the space, the new world prairies, as a place of construction, where the actions of her characters make up

the landscape. This is the conception where Nils Ericson and Clara Vavrika are found. He represents the adventurous, daring man. The female protagonist, women who have opinions, is also unafraid, even if it is a dangerous and expensive option for her and her great love.

PLACE AS BELONGING

"the landscape is anchored in human life, is not something to be looked at, but something to be lived in."
(MEINING, 1979, p. 228)

Belonging to a place occurs in human beings' link with nature. This connection to the land is present in the figure of the matriarch, Mrs. Ericson, and also in the figure of the protagonists, Clara and Nils. For them, the important thing is to cultivate their identity, although they release themselves from earlier places and events. The love of land is not bound only to a place or a past, but to a new construction; which provides the opportunity to create bonds in other locales.

The characters who travel through "The Bohemian Girl" are constructed in such a way that the space proves to be very important in their lives. The landscape of the place is described in the course of the narrative as the "dusty road up valley and high prairies, where the yellow wheat resisted the bright sunlight." (Cather, 1992, p. 90)

At that point, the narrator refers to the place that represents the hardness of a barren wasteland. The property, the house, the place are detailed in such a way that the commitment to this space is noted, so that it even seems sacred.

Upon a white dusty road which ran straight up from the river valley to the high prairies, where the ripe wheat stood yellow and the tin roofs and weather-cocks were twinkling in the fierce sunlight. (CATHER, 1992, p. 90)

Finally, Nills was at home, the place brings memories of the past, childhood, youth, and the character was about to review everything – the image of the house, of that space that holds all feelings, good and bad.

The image of the house, which connects warmth to affection as a "protective nest," has for each of us a particular architecture. The symbol is therefore linked to mental structures, affective schemes, the unconscious formations that recover the object, not for what it is, but

for what it suggests, insinuates. By this process, [the] house can be seen as a sacred place, as the abode of the gods, as the possibility of reclaiming childhood. (CHEVALIER and GEERBRANT, 1969 cited by WALTJ, 2001, p. 103)

In this narrative, Mrs. Ericson's house is, for Nils, not only a space loaded with memory of affection, but also hardness. The narrator describes the house and the path taken by the character with propriety. They corroborate their feelings with what Ecléa Bosi (1987) mentions when saying that insofar as there are memories, that does not mean reliving, but rebuilding the present based on past experiences. In this case, the memory is a process of reconstructing affection as well as some discord.

The narrator tells us about Nils and Clara's past love and places a dose of poetry within the account, which causes the text to be marked by a poetic prose. This past comes back in the dark night as a flash back to a time, which may suddenly come to the fore. The figure which turns into the horse is Clara Vavrika, the real girl of Bohemia. This vision was Nils "... as an inevitable detail of the landscape," (CATHER, 1992, p. 93) but scored his life again, leading him to remember what had happened. We thus have the confirmation that the space of memory may present itself once again.

The excerpt below clearly shows this.

As Nils was crossing the dry creek he heard the restive tramp of a horse coming toward him down the hill. Instantly he flashed out of the road and stood behind a thicket of wild plum bushes that grew in the sandy bed. Peering through the dusk, he saw a light horse, under tight rein, descending the hill at a sharp walk. The rider was a slender woman – barely visible against the dark hillside – wearing an old-fashioned derby hat and a long riding-skirt. She sat lightly in the saddle, with her chin high, and seemed to be looking into the distance. As she passed the plum thicket her horse snuffed the air and shied. She struck him, pulling him in sharply, with an angry exclamation, "Blázne!" in Bohemian. Once in the main road, she let him out into a lope, and they soon emerged upon the crest of high land, where they moved along the sky-line, silhouetted against the band of faint color that lingered in the west. This horse and rider, with their free, rhythmical gallop, were the only moving things to be seen on the face of the flat country. They seemed, in the last sad light of evening, not to be there accidentally, but as an inevitable detail of the landscape. (CATHER, 1992, p. 92-93)

The description of the figure of the woman crossing the protagonist's path characterizes the subjective perception of the landscape in "The Bohemian Girl" and the poetic content of Cather's prose. Horse and rider seem an inevitable detail of the landscape. We identify from this view, the figure of woman intertwined with the landscape.

... the landscape is perceived geographically, not as a single, objective world, but rather, in terms of a perception that seeks to interpret the whole of the sense of space/world experienced, and what constitutes the special nature of attitudes and human intentions, involved in the dimensions of the experience. (FERREIRA, 1990, p. 160)

Again it is possible to see that the landscape is part of the “space/world experienced” by the characters. Acts, memories and feelings are elements that do not dissociate from it. A good example is the Clara’s feeling that perpetuates the past with her beloved Nils and he, arriving at his mother’s property, observes from a distance the kitchen of the house and relives his childhood time, when that place served as a dance room for his older brothers. It all comes back to his memory; it is now about to start.

In the dialogue that the character has with his mother, the narrator presents the reflection made by the mother, “Well, I suppose we have to miss things at one end or the other. Perhaps you are as well satisfied with your own doings, now, as you’d have been with a farm,” said Mrs. Ericson reassuringly.” (CATHER, 1992, p. 96) The matriarch’s speech is to show the child that life is about choices, which are not always easy, but what is worse is not to choose. And yet without fear of consequences.

Therefore, “The Bohemian Girl” conveys the idea of space as belonging. The characters live the place; their space is beautiful and sacred. The place is marked as a space of silence, reflection, love.

“The Bohemian Girl” also describes the space as an abstract literary element that provides feelings for the characters. The character Nils lives the splendour of the landscape that seemed to transcend human life. He retains his love of the land, without the intention of claiming it as property because, as his mother said, he would never be content to be bound to the land. There was wanderer’s blood in his father’s family and Nils inherited it. Still, he recalled the place where he lived and that he kept as a part of himself that was left behind.

In this sense, we should remember what Unamuno (2006) says, that human beings are not only part of the landscape of a place, but are also injected into it. And this is how the characters are understood in “The Bohemian Girl.” Besides the protagonist, Clara Vavrika, Nils and his mother, the family matriarch, also live the place; their path is condensed in managing, in caring. Their strong and agile personality faces obstacles and supports the clashes with toughness.

To paraphrase Alves (2013), the relationship with the land does not mean settling in one place; but to make sense of the world from a certain place, to understand the real experience of life. Thus, it appears that in the short story “The Bohemian Girl” Cather sought to describe the path of the character that left a certain space to start over and give meaning to her life.

The narrator, describing the immigrants’ space, shows the landscape as part of the characters. The place consists of barren land, dust, plantations, the river, the dry climate, the scorching sun and the shade of fruit trees which soften the climate and hearts are part of this new environment. She also compares the Ericsons’ garden to the property belonging to Mr. Joe, Clara’s father. The garden is described along with the orchard, cherries and gooseberries, that region’s produce and part of that place.

So Alves recognizes that:

The garden, literally and metaphorically, is also the representation of the ideal space; this is a place where the dialogue between the natural and abstraction embody the human condition. It is, in short, a place that directs the eye to the generosity of the land: to its beauty and its fruit. (2006, p. 21)

This “ideal space,” described by Foucault (2001), when the garden is seen as a product of dreams and the desire for happiness, it is also noted in the narrator’s description. Thus, Foucault explains the idea of a happy space.

The traditional garden of the Persians was a sacred space that should incorporate four parts representing the four corners of the world within its rectangle . . . As for the carpets, they were initially reproductions of the gardens. The garden is a carpet where the whole world realizes its symbolic perfection, and the carpet is a kind of mobile garden through space . . . (p. 418).

A few excerpts in “The Bohemian Girl” illustrate the concept that Alves (2006) and Foucault (2001) present when referring to the gardens. The narrator points to the existence of the gardens on the properties. It shows them the story as representing a cosy space where the characters circulate. The memories also announce that the being belongs to nature; one can talk to it and feel it. When Nils returns, the brothers recall they how they spoke to nature. And Eric says that the leaves still talk to him.

The narrative presents poetic passages that establish relations between the lived spaces, auditory sensations and the characters’ feelings.

For Alves, "The garden is memory and art. Memory of the individual, the country, humanity's collective; art because it holds chaos and returns order. " (2006, p. 26)

This conception of world is identified when Nils and his brother show that the memories are alive in their memories. We may also refer to Mia Couto's conception in his text "The Voices of the Picture" when he says that "the image is even more beautiful insofar as it is auditory, evoking sounds of the moment." (2008, p. 75.)

Or as Mia Couto writes in "Waters of My Beginning:"

The city is not a place. It is the frame of a lifetime. The frame looking for a picture and that's what I see when I revisit my birthplace. They aren't streets; they aren't houses are not. What I re-examine is a time; what I hear is speech of that time. A dialect called memory, a nation called childhood. (p. 145)

What we note about Eric and brother Nils' memories, is that when the former says that the leaves still talk to him, they evoke this feeling of returning to the past, of memories that do not want to keep quiet.

In this sense, Willa Cather's writing, says Alves, "illustrates the influence that place exerts on the human imagination." (2006, p. 23). The place, space, occupied by the characters through memories and imagination bring a past that remains alive in their hearts forward to the present. This space can influence memories: the art of music, the playing of the flute, the piano, dancing and feeling happy are the old habits of Clara's family. The identity of family has always been preserved. Such habits that Clara's father tries to cultivate, even after many years and many episodes suffered by the family.

The protagonist, Clara Vavrika, did not leave the habit of playing piano either. Although she is married to a lazy man, she keeps her taste as well as her former beloved, Nils, through the flute.

The character Nils recalls his childhood and his sister-in-law, Clara Vavrika's father's cheerful home, the space which brought him good memories. This place promoted joy, as all lived there in moderation. They knew how to balance work and leisure, which was not the case in his parents' house, where they lived only for work.

Osman Lins (1976, p.76) confirms this memory of Nils regarding space. "There are cases where the space is justified by the atmosphere it provokes." The character did not fail to remember the space that provoked a pleasant atmosphere in him in the

past and continues to provoke it in the present. The idea is also observed in Bachelard discussing the home space.

We have to say how we inhabit our vital space according to all the dialectics of life, how we root ourselves, day by day, in a “corner of the world.” Because our house is our corner of the world. It is as they often say, our first universe. It is a real cosmos. ... The true starting points of the image, if the we study it phenomenologically, will specifically reveal the values of inhabited space, the protecting non-self and the self. . . . Every inhabited real space brings the essence of the notion of home. (1996, p. 23-25)

In the case of “The Bohemian Girl,” the house that provokes cosiness is the house in which happiness settles; it is not the matriarch’s house. Still, at the beginning of the narrative, the mother’s house is detailed and this space brings good memories.

The narrator exposes Nils’ conception of what would be a happy home. So says his mother, “You never took the trouble to find out that it was the one jolly house in this country for a boy to go to.” (Cather, 1992, p.19)

His mother was a hard, stubborn, woman who did not know fun. Thus was his personality; he did not understand Clara Vavrika’s family’s joy. This perspective legitimized Meinig’s (1979) notion that place can affect and leave memories, from the dialogue between Nils and his mother.

In this view, each landscape is a place, an individual part in the endless varied mosaic of land. The viewer begins by being both comprehensive and naive; because it compels everyone to accept everything seen as being of some interest. It is landscape as environment, embracing all that we live in the environment, and thereby cultivating a sensitivity to detail, texture, colour, every nuance of visual relationships, and more, for the environment involves all our senses, the sounds and smells and ineffable feeling of such a place. (p. 45)

Willa Cather presents gentle, tough, stubborn, indolent characters. All bring memories and carry strong connections to the space where they lived and live. The narrator describes the space of the Vavrikas’ house as cosy to friends and visitors.

Vavrika’s house was, so to speak, in the back yard of his saloon. The garden between the two buildings was enclosed by a high board fence as tight as partition, and in summer Joe kept bee-tables and wooden benches among the gooseberry bushes under his little cherry tree. (CATHER, 1992, p. 109)

In the course of the narrative, there are places that recall the past, spaces of remembering. In the above description, Cather shows the character Nils in Clara’s

father's house, detailing the landscape that makes up the place: the river, the garden, the fruit trees, tables and benches, the space of leisure and longing. Cosiness is thus found. Ribeiro (1991) highlights the idea of the importance of the landscape, not only in the aesthetic sense, but also with regards to the physical space. The place shows a tableau of life, an account of the land that characterizes man. Simon Schama's conception also confirms the presence of the landscape as a "home for the senses" and as the "work of the mind." The author mentions that the constitution of the landscape, as a form of human perception, is also a form of memories.

For even though we are used to situating nature and human perception into two distinct camps, in fact they are inseparable. Before you can be a haven for the senses, the landscape is a work of the mind. It is as much composed of layers of memories as strata of rocks. (1996, p. 17)

The return of the "adventurer" presents human beings covering themselves over with new prospects and capable of appreciating the place where they lived at other times. This return causes Clara to make the decision to take chances, giving up her comfortable life next to Olaf, for love and a life of adventure. However, the protagonist is insecure and thinks about her situation as a wife and about the place to which she belongs today.

[Clara] felt as if she could not bear separation from her old sorrows, from her old discontent. They were dear to her, they had kept her alive, they were a part of her. There would be nothing left of her if she were wrenched away from them. Never could she pass beyond that sky-line against which her restlessness had beat so many times. She felt as if her soul had built itself a nest there on that horizon at which she looked every morning and every evening and it was dear to her, inexpressibly dear. (CATHER, 1992, p. 128)

The excerpt above shows the feeling that the protagonist, Clara Vavrika, has for the space and people she has related with for years. The character is stuck in a way, rooted in that place, with that family in that situation of dependence. And all of that is very precious to her, perhaps the fear of facing another world leads her to reflect on the escape with her beloved. But despite this sentiment, through half closed eyes, Clara threw a challenging glance.

The two protagonists disappear into the shadow of the night to a new horizon, leaving behind a story that, in a way, marked their lives. But the younger brother, Eric, is undecided about leaving his life in Nebraska beside Mrs. Ericson, because not everything that is right for one may be for the other. Eric has another conception of life,

very different from his “adventurous” brother; escape is not so simple for him. The teenager is well aware of everything he would have to leave behind. He tries to escape, even boarding the train; he will find his brother and sister-in-law Clara – but he gives up halfway. He reflects on his life, beside his mother, and the space where he grew up, and that makes him give up.

This behaviour of Eric’s confirms Relph’s idea, that the place refers to a “kind of experiment and involvement with the world, the need for roots and security.” (1979, p. 17). Therefore, the possible link of this conception of “space” with Willa Cather’s writing is assured.

The writer is able to show in “The Bohemian Girl” the relationship that the characters have with the space where they live. It is perceived that Olaf, Nils Eric, Mrs. Ericson, Clara Vavrika and Joe carry the history of the place, each in their own way. This experience brings to the surface that the “sense of belonging to a certain place constructs an insight of values that determine the individuals’ way of life.” (SANTOS, 1994, p. 65). Everyone has problems that cause differences and that affect relationships and each one’s “way of life”. The important thing is to try to understand the characteristics of the places, to consider not only the positive aspects that will enable the construction of identity, but also the divergences arising from the agreements and disagreements.

In Tavares’ view (2010), “places” are not only “spaces” they are actually places where human beings commune with feelings and build their own private space and community. The characters that make up “The Bohemian Girl” walk forth from this perspective.

CONCLUSION

“The Bohemian Girl” (1992) is a tale that designed each character’s space, making them confront their “I.” The characters seek a solution to stay alive, active, connected to the past, willing to feed the memories, but above all, not to fail to enjoy the present, even while reliving the past by their old leisure habits, such as listening to music, singing, playing the flute, the piano and letting the feeling of love of the present space flood their hearts. This feeling was the representation of everything the characters of “The Bohemian Girl” perceived, felt or interpreted in the everyday life of

the new world. The landscape, nature and, in particular, the garden are presented as each one's space.

This love of the gardens brings us to the protagonists' feeling. They recall the past through the landscape, Clara's father, Mr. Joe's garden, certainly to relive moments of happiness as well as losses that have occurred but that will possibly be reconstructed with merit.

It is clear that in Cather's writing, the geographical space and the space of memories are part of the whole narrative. It is as if they are hitched to each character. Through these spaces, nature is heard, as they both brothers, Eric and Nils, said in vivid poetic moments "... leaves were whispering when they rustled at night" (Cather, 1992, p 97)

Finally, the tale ends in a completely unexpected manner. The characters that, in principle, seemed flat become surprising, giving bolder answers. That is the strategy writer Willa Cather uses to entice the reader into perceiving new paths to a successful outcome. This perspective was made possible for Eric, a quiet character who suddenly shows up giddy with the possibility of leaving, of constructing his life elsewhere; but in the middle of the trip he takes a turn and changes his mind, returning to the bosom of his family. This leads us to believe that choices, decisions, are not easy in fiction either. Apparently, the flight of the two lovers had not been as successful as the contradictory decision of a teenager.

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