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The Power of Place: Aesthetic and Semiotic Function of Landscape in Henry James' The Europeans – An Interdisciplinary Study

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ABSTRACT	
ARTICLE INFO Received 17 March 2021 Accepted 07 June 2021 Available on line: 01 January 2022	<p>Recently, due to the lockdown of the whole world after the spread of Covid 19, the significance of spatiality and the dynamic relations among space, place, and culture has now become an important approach to the humanities. In the discourse of postmodernism, place appears as a key concept in literary studies to determine the cultural dimensions of the human experience. This paper is an attempt to bring to focus the importance of place in culture-oriented literary texts. The most suitable ones for the purpose of this study are those that deal with the “international theme” of the cultural conflict between the Old and the New Worlds; one of the major themes which are found in the works of the great 19th century American novelist Henry James. He deals in his novels with a variety of cultural, social, and moral issues through stories of intercultural encounters between American and European characters. Thus, this paper studies one of his least appreciated novels, <i>The Europeans</i> (1878), to show that the greatness of the text lies in the aesthetic and semiotic power of its landscape which acts as an interactive medium for expressing emotions and</p>

Keywords

functions as a process of signification conditioned by the American culture.

Henry James; Culture; Landscape; Objective Correlative; Semiotics

Introduction:

There is an abundance of theoretical grounding regarding the functioning of real or painted landscapes. Some have focused on contextual and historicist approaches that read landscape as a visual representation of nature and history like Clark's (1976) *Landscape into Art*. In the field of literature, there have been attempts to discuss how landscape makes meaning in literary texts, such as Mellard's (1996) essay "Reading 'Landscape' in Literature" in which he tries to propose a theory about the ways landscape is used in literature and art to produce meaningⁱ. A different approach is adopted by Spirn (1998) in her book *The Language of Landscape* where landscapes are studied as being analogous to a text with its language. Other attempts have tried to bring the study of landscape into line with themes of cultural studies as in Mitchell's (2002) book *The Power of Landscape* which views landscape as a process in shaping national and social identities. Most recent theories of landscape are found to establish a discipline called landscape semiotics which is based on the works of many thinkers like C. S. Peirce.

In the postmodern theoretical context, there is an increasing interest in the power of place as one of the essential components of making sense of the world surrounding us. Its significance in literary texts is of no less importance than other aspects of literature, such as plot, as Tally (2008) argues in his essay "Geocriticism and Classical American Literature". He states that place in a work of art is of equal importance to plot in providing "a system of meaning to allow one to understand one's world" (p. 7). To put it more clearly, place is recently viewed as an essential element in the process of literary composition and

in the generation of meaning rather than just a mere background for the progress of action in a work of art.

In response, this paper is an attempt to demonstrate the role of landscape in the dynamics of literary composition. My hypothesis is that landscape could provide a pattern and a system of meaning that help the reader to appreciate and understand the themes and ideas discussed in the text. I have chosen James' novel *The Europeans* to serve as the experimental ground. There are several reasons behind the choice of this work in particular. The first is the novel's depiction of the theme of cultural confrontations between the Old and the New Worlds. The second is my conviction that this piece of art has not received enough critical attention. The third is James' intentional choice of New England as a setting for the novel where the reader is exposed to several lengthy descriptive passages of urban and rural New England, reminding him/her that landscape is powerfully present in the text. The fourth is the fact that previous studiesⁱⁱ of the novel focused on the discursive and meaning-based utility of the words in the text and ignored the sensory dimensions of the characters' interaction with landscape.

The paper aims at showing the power of landscape in *The Europeans* where it performs a double interrelated function in the text— an aesthetic and a semiotic one. The aesthetic role lies in using the spatial as a 'formula' to objectify the emotional. While the semiotic function is revealed in the signification process of landscape that creates a dialogic medium for the discussion of cultural themes and issues which, I believe, would not have been fulfilled on the level of textual meaning only.

To fulfil the aim of this study, Eliot's critical theory of the "objective correlative" is used to demonstrate the aesthetic role of landscape. Meanwhile, Peirce's triadic model of the sign is adopted as a framework for the analysis of the semiotic function of New England's landscape. One of the benefits of this study is that it provides a theoretically based approach for studying the power of landscape as an

interactive context for the communication of emotions, meanings, and issues related to intercultural confrontations in literary texts.

The Europeans:

The Europeans, published in 1878, focuses on the experience of a transatlantic encounter that takes place in the New England of the 1830s. James sends Eugenia and her brother Felix, the descendants of American expatriates who spent their whole lives in Europe, on a trip to New England. Baroness Munster, Eugenia, is morganatically married to a German prince who, under the influence of his brother, wishes to end up the marriage due to political reasons. She and her brother decide to go to America to visit their rich relatives and to seek fortune in the New Land. At the beginning of the novel, we are introduced to Eugenia as a rigid 33-year-old woman who is not pretty, but behaves as if she were, and has her own way of making herself admirable if she likes. Her brother Felix is a Bohemian artist of an optimistic, kind-hearted, and easy-going character. They have arrived at Boston, New England, to visit their American cousins the Wentworths. Their uncle has two daughters, Gertrude and Charlotte, and a son, Clifford. Eugenia and Felix are invited to stay in a separate cottage on their uncle's lands during their visit. The siblings also meet three close acquaintances to the Wentworths: Mr. Brand, a preacher, and Mr. Robert Acton, their cousin, and his sister Lizzie. Each of Eugenia and her brother begins a new love relationship. But because of Eugenia's inability to cope with the American culture, she returns to Europe decisive to complete as the wife of a Prince. The novel closes with Felix happily married to his cousin Gertrude.

Critical views on The Europeans:

The Europeans received and is still receiving contradictory reviews, either criticized for its lack of substance and quality or praised as the finest of James' works that deal with significant cultural themes.

In his book *The Short Novels of Henry James*, Hoffmann (1957) points out that *The Europeans* is “one of the least satisfying of James’ short novels” (p. 37) and describes it as a “reminiscent of an Elizabethan comedy of errors in which ‘all’s well that ends well’” (p. 38).

Probably, *The Europeans* has not been given serious critical attention due to James’ confession that it was lacking quality. He wrote, on the 14th of Nov. 1878, in response to his brother’s, William James, “painful reflections on” the novel that he himself was “aware of its extreme slightness” and that his brother was “quite right in pronouncing the book ‘thin’ & empty” (Skrupskelis, 1997, p. 118).

On the contrary, some critics see *The Europeans* as a fine piece of art. Leavis (1950) admits that the novel “is dismissed as ‘slight’” but he sees it “a masterpiece of major quality” (p. 141). Meanwhile, Gale (1989) praises its “specifically well-delineated New England” (p. 214). Similarly, this paper highly appreciates its “well-delineated” setting but from the standpoint of the postmodern and semiotic approaches of studying landscape in literature.

New England: A symbolic locality:

In 1877, James sent a letter to W. D. Howells in which he outlines the plot of *The Europeans*. This letter reveals James’ intention to set his novel in the New England of the 1830s. James (1956) wrote to Howells that it will be a “very joyous little romance” about a young man of a Bohemian father who travels back to visit his Puritan relatives in New England, and that he (James) shall “play havoc with the New England background of the 1830” (pp. 66- 67). The letter reveals two significant things about the novel. The first is the main theme of *The Europeans*, i.e., the “international theme” of cultural encounters between American and European characters. The second is the author’s choice to set the events of his novel in a specific New England setting.

One interpretation of the author’s preference of New England as a setting is provided by Taylor, in his introduction to the Penguin’s

edition of *The Europeans*. He refers this choice to the concurrent publication of James' critical study of Nathaniel Hawthorne and *The Europeans*. According to Taylor (2008), *The Europeans* is James' first attempt to reflect his "interest in the possibilities of transatlantic exchange and migration as means of exploring various forms of identity, personal and national" and New England had long been praised in Hawthorne's novels as the birthplace of American rootedness and national identity (p. xiv).

I agree with Taylor's interpretation that the cultural dimension of New England seems to be a reason behind James' choice of it as a setting for his novel. As a matter of fact, New England is commonly known as the origin of American culture. It is the birthplace of eminent American authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, and Edgar Allan Poe. New England is one of the three regions, the other two are the Mid-West and Southern California, that have acted as "critical areas" in the development of American culture (Meinig, 1979, p.179). Furthermore, it has been looked to as the "cultural patrimony" of many Americans (Wortham-Galvin, (2010), p. 24) and as the "key symbol of the identity of the United States as a 'country'" (Olwig, (2002), pp. 177-178). Thus, culturally speaking, the significance of New England lies in its position as a microcosm of the whole American nation.

Geographically speaking, the landscape of New England has long been known for its symbolic character. According to Meinig (1979), "every mature nation has its symbolic landscapes. They are part of the iconography of nationhood, part of the shared set of ideas and memories and feelings which bind a people together" (p. 164). Meinig believes that the symbolic significance of the landscape of New England lies in the fact that it is "powerfully evocative"; the scene of a village enclosed in "great elms and maples" and "marked by" rising steeples above "a white wooden church" surrounded by an array of "large white clapboard

houses” is “sufficient” to bring to the mind the image of “a special kind of place in a very famous region” and to symbolize for many people “an intimate, family-centered, Godfearing, morally conscious, industrious, thrifty, democratic *community*” (p. 165). Remarkably enough, this is exactly the same locality in which Eugenia and Felix are intentionally placed by the author; they are taken to the locus of the symbolic landscape of New England.

Landscape in *The Europeans* is characterized by being kaleidoscopic. The novel contains myriad of colourful scenes and lengthy descriptive passages representative of urban and rural New England landscape elements like the ancient city of Boston with its “church spires” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 1), “horse cars” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 2), “large public gardens” and “arching elms” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 11). Since New England is an area of cultural importance and local symbolic significance, it seems difficult to regard the novel’s setting as just a stage for the characters to act on or a background for the development of the action of the plot. Both cultural and symbolic aspects of the setting deserve a thorough investigation and an elaborative explanation.

Before delving into the practical part of this study, it seems important to illuminate some concepts used in the analysis such as the meaning of place, culture, and landscape. In this paper, place is used in the light of its “most straightforward and common definition” as “a meaningful location” (Cresswell, 2015, p. 7). Culture is a complex term, a rather broadly defined one which encompasses a range of different and sometimes paradoxical topics. Jenks (2005) mentions in his book *Culture* that the concept of culture has four dimensions. From a philosophical perspective, culture has a cognitive dimension where it specifies “that which is remarkable in human creative achievement” (p. 9). Culture also has a “collective” dimension where it “invokes a state of intellectual and/or moral development in society”. There is also the “concrete” dimension where the meaning of culture is understood in

terms of the concept of civilization. Fourthly, the social dimension of culture introduces it as “the whole way of life of a people” (p. 12). Since cultural differences and intercultural confrontations are the focus of James’ fiction, this requires a comprehensive four-dimensional apprehension of the term to encompass the cultural issues represented in the novel.

As the paper aims at an interdisciplinary study of the aesthetic and semiotic function of landscape, more than one definition of the term landscape is required. Landscapeⁱⁱⁱ is a very broad term of different definitions and concepts specified according to the context of application. For the aesthetic purpose of this study, the most suitable definition of landscape is provided by Simensen, Halvorsen, and Erikstad (2018) as “a geographical area characterized by its content of observable, natural and human-induced, landscape element” (p. 559). According to Musher, Klijn and, Wascher (2010), the elements or components of landscape are: “abiotic” (climate, geology, hydrology, soils), “biotic” (flora and fauna), and “cultural factors” (land use and landscape structure) (p. 89). For the sake of the semiotic context, the concept of landscape is “not limited to physical landforms, neither to a cultural image or a way of seeing: it is a holistic notion that links both the physical expanse and the cultural ideas that a perceiving subject or a society has about it. It is a humane phenomenon” (Lindstrom, Palang, &Kull, 2011, p. 15). Another relevant definition is found in Mitchell (2002) where landscape is defined as a

medium not only for expressing value but also for expressing meaning, for communication between persons – most radically, for communication between the Human and the non-Human. Landscape mediates the cultural and the natural, or “Man” and “Nature” It is not only a natural scene, and not just a representation of a natural scene, but a *natural* representation of a natural scene, a trace or icon of nature *in* nature itself, as if nature were imprinting and encoding its essential structures on our perceptual apparatus. (p. 15)

The best thing about the last two definitions is that they do not exclude human perception and participation, which this paper regards as essential elements in the process of landscape signification. Finally, it is worth mentioning that in this study the terms landscape and setting are used interchangeably where they refer to the physical, cultural, and natural aspects of New England.

The Aesthetic Function of Landscape:

The aesthetic function of landscape in *The Europeans* can be demonstrated in the light of the critical theory of the “objective correlative”. This literary theory was set forth by Eliot (1920) in his essay “Hamlet and His Problems” published in *The Sacred Wood*. Eliot wrote:

The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an “objective correlative”; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked.

In other words, a writer can express emotions in his work of art by finding an external objective equivalent that acts as an extension of these emotions. I suggest here that, in *The Europeans*, the landscape of New England functions as a “formula” to describe the emotions experienced by the siblings, mainly Eugenia, during their intercultural encounter. In order to validate this hypothesis, it seems necessary to begin my argument with an illustration of the kind of emotions experienced by James’ characters in the text, particularly the Europeans.

As mentioned before, the novel deals with James’ “international theme”. Thus, the most common emotions that are expected to be experienced are the feelings accompanied by the character’s attempts to cope with the new environment. This character either succeeds in adjusting to the new culture or fails in adapting and thus suffers from what is called “culture shock”. “Culture shock” is a term coined by

Oberg (1960) to refer to “the anxiety that results from losing all our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse” (p. 142). Another definition for the term is provided in an essay written by Weaver (2000), entitled “Understanding and Coping with Cross-Cultural Adjustment Stress”, as a term “commonly used to describe almost any physical or emotional discomfort experienced by those adjusting to a new environment” (p. 177).

I believe that the siblings demonstrate two completely different types of emotions in their encounter with the American culture. Felix, being a good-natured man with a great sense of humour, easily amalgamates and wins the trust of the American characters and the love of his cousin Gertrude. Eugenia, on the other hand, reacts differently. Her rigidity and excessive formality act as a barrier between her and her relatives, as well as the American culture. Consequently, she strives to cope with the new environment, but she fails after experiencing the heavy emotions of culture shock.

Eugenia has shown early signs of culture shock the moment she sets foot in New England. The novel opens on the 12th of May in one of the “best hotels in the ancient city of Boston” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 1), where the siblings have just arrived. The first chapter begins with a long descriptive passage in which Boston’s landscape is illustrated as bleak, gloomy, indifferent, and depressing:

A narrow grave-yard in the heart of a bustling, indifferent city, seen from the windows of a gloomy-looking inn, is at no time an object of enlivening suggestion; and the spectacle is not at its best when the mouldy tombstones and funereal umbrage have received the ineffectual refreshment of a dull, moist snowfall. If, while the air is thickened by this frosty drizzle, the calendar should happen to indicate that the blessed vernal season is already six weeks old, it will be admitted that no depressing influence is absent from the scene. . . . (James, [1878] 2008, p. 1)

For Eugenia, the surrounding environment appears to be hostile and unwelcoming, and thus she feels “restless” (James, [1878] 2008, p.

1). Her anxiety and agitation are intensified by the scene of the “church spire” that evokes in her feelings of contempt and irritation: “The lady at the window looked at it [the church spire] for some time; for reason of her own she thought it the ugliest thing she had ever seen. She hated it, she despised it; it threw her in a state of irritation that was quite out of proportion to any sensible motive” (James, [1878] 2008, pp. 2-3).

In fact, Eugenia feels depressed and shocked by everything in Boston: the landscape, the climate, means of transportation, the state of the roads, and the plain façade of the American houses. Boston’s landscape leaves Eugenia in a state of disappointment that she decides to go back to Europe: “‘It’s too horrible!’ she exclaimed. ‘I shall go back-I shall go back!’” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 3). On the contrary, her brother Felix does not experience the same feelings of anxiety and discomfort. Boston’s landscape appears for him a rich material for his sketches because of its “amusing” and “charming” nature (James, [1878] 2008, p. 5). Thus, he acts as a foil to his sister, and this highlights the severity of her cultural disharmony.

My suggestion that Eugenia is suffering from culture shock is based on a detailed analysis of the symptoms that are displayed to the reader within the course of narration. Weaver (2000) points out that there are three main reasons for the occurrence of culture shock: “(1) the loss of familiar cues, (2) the breakdown of interpersonal communication, and (3) an identity crisis” (p. 178). Interestingly enough, this coming analysis will show that Eugenia’s attitude is partly due to her loss of familiar cues and the breakdown of interpersonal communication with her relatives and with Robert Acton, her potential American suitor.

“Familiar cues” include both “social cues”, such as “words, gestures, [and] facial expressions” that “provide order in interpersonal relations”, and “physical cues” that “include objects which we have become accustomed to in our home culture” and which “make us feel comfortable” (Weaver, 2000, p. 178). Eugenia’s struggle with the loss of familiar cues is evident when she redecorates the cottage offered to

her by her uncle. Eugenia and her maid, Augustine, agree that it is “pitifully bare”, and thus she starts to “hang up *portieres* in the doorways; to place wax candles . . . to dispose anomalous draperies over the arms of sofas and the backs of chairs” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 48). This incident shows that Eugenia feels that she is a fish out of water. Her redecoration of the cottage is an attempt, as she admits, to feel at home (James, [1878] 2008, p. 48).

Another evidence that Eugenia is suffering from culture shock is suggested by her failure in interpersonal communication especially the nonverbal one, which for Weaver (2000) is “very important in the communication of feelings” (p. 179). This failure is early manifested when she meets her uncle for the first time. Mr. Wentworth welcomes Eugenia, but she greets him with a look and a smile that thwart any kind of social interaction. Mr. Wentworth is intimidated by her conduct: “He felt almost frightened. He had never been looked at in just that way – with just that fixed, intense smile – by any woman; and it perplexed and weighed upon him” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 31). Furthermore, her behaviour is misunderstood; her uncle interprets it to be a non-verbal message “of her possessing other unprecedented attributes” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 31). As a consequence, she gradually loses interpersonal communication with her uncle who is “paralysed and bewildered by her foreignness” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 56). As for her cousins Gertrude and Charlotte, they are frequently at a loss as regards how to treat her. Charlotte is overcome with shyness, but Gertrude quickly sees through Eugenia’s manners which she judges as an attempt of putting an act for the sake of politeness (James, [1878] 2008, p. 34). Consequently, they feel perplexed between “their desire to show all proper attention to Madame Munster and their fear of being importunate” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 52). Meanwhile, Eugenia cannot understand the messages she receives from them, and therefore neither becomes her friend. Thus, the absence of familiar behavioural and social cues leads to a breakdown of

all kinds of communication between Eugenia and her American relatives.

Another example of Eugenia's failure in establishing successful interpersonal relations takes place when she goes to visit Robert Acton and his ill mother. During the visit, Eugenia is shocked by their rejection of her social behaviour:

It was a great occasion for poor Mrs. Acton, in her helpless condition, to be confronted with a clever foreign lady, who had more manner than any lady – any dozen ladies – that she had ever seen.

'I have heard a great deal about you,' she said, softly, to the Baroness.

'From your son, eh?' Eugenia asked. 'He has talked to me immensely of you. Oh, he talks of you as you would like,' the Baroness declared; 'as such a son *must* talk of such a mother!'

Mrs. Acton sat gazing; this was part of Madame Munster's 'manner'. (James, [1878] 2008, pp. 80- 81)

Robert Acton is "gazing too" because he is quite sure that "he [has] barely mentioned his mother to their brilliant guest". Eugenia "instantly [feels] that she [has] been observed to be fibbing" (James, [1878] 2008, p. 81). Consequently, the mother and her son recoil from Eugenia's social etiquette. Annoyed by their reaction, Eugenia feels uncomfortable and leaves the house quickly. This failure of different intercultural encounters arouses Eugenia's feelings of culture shock, widens the gap between her and the New Englanders, and finally leads to her subsequent decision of going back to Europe.

Reading the novel in the light of Eliot's critical theory of the "objective correlative" will show that Eugenia's feelings of culture shock are expressed in the form of a regular artistic pattern in which landscape acts as an equivalent to these emotions. It will also demonstrate how the landscape of New England changes in proportion to the ups and downs in Eugenia's emotions. For example, when she feels depressed or shocked, landscape appears repulsive and gloomy and

when she feels optimistic, New England changes into a charming place that welcomes her.

This artistic pattern can be traced from the very beginning of the novel. When Eugenia arrives in Boston, she feels anxious and restless, and these emotions are expressed in the dull and bleak atmosphere. Yet, when she goes out with her brother for a walk about the city and notices the effect of her European air on the Americans, her spirits rise high, the landscape of Boston and its weather become gorgeous acting again as an objective correlative for these feelings of pleasure:

The sunset was superb; they stopped to look at it; Felix declared that he had never seen such a gorgeous mixture of colours. The Baroness also thought it splendid; and she was perhaps the more easily pleased from the fact that while she stood there she was conscious of much admiring observation on the part of various nice-looking people . . . Eugenia's spirits rose. She surrendered herself to a certain tranquil gaiety.

If she had come to seek her fortune, it seemed to her that her fortune would be easy to find. There was a promise of it in the gorgeous purity of the western sky. . . (James, [1878] 2008, p. 11-12)

In this passage, it seems clear how the description of landscape changes dramatically resonating Eugenia's optimistic expectations for the success of her journey to seek a rich husband. Earlier, when she was in bad spirits, she complained that the sky of Boston was multicoloured and was hurting her eyes (James, [1878] 2008, p. 10). But now, her spirits are good and the sky appears to be of "gorgeous purity" (James, [1878] 2008, p. 11). Thus, the moment Eugenia starts to feel happy and accepts the new environment, landscape responds positively. The next day is more splendid; the frosty and rainy weather changes suddenly to a spring climate and then quickly to a summery one (James, [1878] 2008, p. 13).

Remarkably enough, as the events of the novel go on, readers can easily follow the fluctuations in Eugenia's emotions that find a significant extension in the landscape of New England. Felix and

Eugenia decide that the former should pay a visit to their uncle and announce their arrival. Felix is overwhelmed by the hospitality of his uncle, and he falls in love at first sight with Gertrude. He returns to Boston and reports his encounter to Eugenia, describing his relatives' way of life as "primitive" and "patriarchal" (James, [1878] 2008, p. 28). Not trusting her brother's judgment, Eugenia decides to pay a visit to her uncle the following day. They drive to the rural area around Boston, where their uncle dwells. On her way, Eugenia examines the surrounding landscape and describes it as being awful (James, [1878] 2008, p. 30). Once more, the feelings of anxiety that she experiences before meeting her relatives is expressed through a dreadful picture of the landscape of the road to their uncle's house.

The Baroness, however, starts to show some positive responses to the kindness and hospitality of her American uncle who offers them his nearby cottage for accommodation. Eugenia is impressed by the simplicity and amiability of her American relatives, and her mood is now at its best (James, [1878] 2008, p. 47). Correlatively, these positive emotions find their equivalence in the landscape surrounding her cottage:

It seemed to her, when from the piazza of her eleemosynary cottage she looked out over the soundless fields, the stony pastures, the clear-faced ponds, the rugged little orchards, that she had never been in the midst of so peculiarly intense a stillness; it was almost a delicate sensual pleasure. It was all very good, very innocent and safe, and out of it something good must come. (James, [1878] 2008, pp. 47- 48)

As shown in this quotation, her happiness is mirrored in the quiet fields, in the "clear-faced ponds" and in the homely and secure atmosphere enfolding her cottage.

Eugenia, then, develops a close relationship with Robert Acton and her spirits seem to be highly affected when he expresses his love and admiration of her character. One day, she asks him if he thinks that her visit to "this out-of-the-way part of the world" is strange (James, [1878]

2008, p. 71). Acton replies that he does not find it strange for a clever woman like her to come to Boston because it “is a very nice place” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 71). Eugenia feels excited and her excitement is reflected in her opinion that Boston is a “paradise” and that she and Acton are “in the suburbs of Paradise” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 71). Moreover, when they go together on rides to see more of the rural landscape of New England, she does not at all criticize its wilderness. She rather finds “a charm in the rapid movement through a wild country” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 74), where there are “almost no houses”, “nothing but woods and rivers and lakes and horizons adorned with bright-looking mountains” (James, [1878] 2008, pp. 74-75). Hence, Eugenia’s positive feelings and her sense of the enlargement of the opportunity of her success in the New World is expressed in the image of the “very wild” but “lovely” rural landscape of New England (James, [1878] 2008, p. 75).

Shortly afterwards, Eugenia’s spirits start to wane sharply, particularly after she visits Acton’s ill mother where she adapts a social etiquette that annoys the mother and her son. Shocked by their reaction, Eugenia feels uncomfortable and leaves the house quickly (James, [1878] 2008, p. 81). Later on, she decides to leave America and readers will notice that landscape acts again as an “objective equivalent” to Eugenia’s feelings of failure and disappointment, especially the climate and the flora of rural New England which has now become threatening and repulsive:

[S]he stood at the window of her little drawing-room, watching the long arm of a rose-tree that was attached to her piazza, but a portion of which had disengaged itself, sway to and fro, shake and gesticulate, against the dusky drizzle of the sky. Every now and then, in a gust of wind, the rose-tree scattered a shower of water-drops against the windowpane; it appeared to have a kind of human movement – a menacing, warning intention . . . (James, [1878] 2008, p. 124)

Eugenia's sense of rejection, alienation, and exclusion are reflected in a sudden change of the clear and pure weather where rain starts to fall and the atmosphere is once again cold and gloomy (James, [1878] 2008, p. 124). Thus, New England's bad weather that has received Eugenia on the day of her arrival is the same that sends her off to Europe. This cyclic characteristic of weather in the novel largely fits in the aesthetic premise of landscape.

Accordingly, Eugenia's experience during her transatlantic encounter is better understood through the natural features of the landscape of New England which act as an objective equivalent to her feelings. Thus, landscape in *The Europeans* performs its aesthetic function when it moves from serving as an artistic representation of a certain place or acting as a background for the events of the novel to functioning as a dynamic medium correlative to the Baroness' emotions.

The Semiotic Function of Landscape:

Some interpretations have attributed Eugenia's unsuccessful attempts to amalgamate into the American culture to her rigid attachment to the European identity that alienated her from "the norms and parameters of 1840s New England" (Taylor, 2008, p. xxi) and stood as a barrier between her and her relatives. Meanwhile, they refer Felix's success to his "precious cosmopolitan identity" (Taylor, 2008, p. xxv). I suggest here a different interpretation which posits that the success or failure of the siblings' experience in the New World depends on the way they read and understand the language of New England's landscape.

The hypothesis that landscape in the novel has a semiotic function is primarily based on Spirn's (1998) premise that "landscape has all the features of language":

It contains the equivalent of words and parts of speech - patterns of shape, structure, material, formation and function. All landscapes are combination of these. Like the meanings of words, the meanings of

landscape elements . . . are only potential until context shapes them.
(p. 15)

Moreover, Spirn (1998) argues that the language of landscape has a “potential figurative” and “rhetorical” power (p. 216) which we should not fail to recognize as it delivers “meaning beyond that originally intended and foreseen” (p. 217). Her approach also emphasizes that landscape signification depends on individual perception; the meaning “is there to be discovered, inherent and ascribed, shaped by what senses perceive, what instinct and experience read as significant, [and] what minds know” (p. 18).

Spirn’s emphasis on individual perception as an essential element in detecting and understanding the meaning of the signs of landscape entails the application of C. S. Peirce’s^{iv} sign theory to illustrate the mechanism of the functioning of landscape as a signifier of issues related to cultural encounters and types of human characters.

Peircean Semiotics:

In *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce (CP)*, the Peircean sign concept posits that there is a “triadic relationship” between (1) the “representamen” or the “sign vehicle” (vol. 1, par. 540); (2) the “object” or “the thing for which it stands” (vol. 1, par. 564); and the “interpretant” or “the idea to which it (the sign vehicle) gives rise” (vol. 1, par. 399). In a letter to Lady Welby, Peirce (1908) writes:

I define a Sign as anything which is so determined by something else, called its Object, and so determines an effect upon a person, which effect I call its Interpretant, that the latter is thereby mediately determined by the former. (Houser et al., 1998, p. 478)

To put it more clearly, a sign in Peirce’s theory consists of three interrelated elements: an object, a sign, and an interpretant. The sign is the signifier, and the object is what is signified. As for the interpretant, Peirce had noted that it “cannot be a *definite* individual object (*CP*, vol.1,

par. 542, emphasis original) and saw it as the “mental effect or thought” (*CP*, vol. 1, par. 564).

Thus, the “signifying process” in Peirce’s theory does not depend on two elements only, the object and its sign, there is also a “third element, the interpretant, or thought, to which the sign gives rise” (Hoopes, 1991, pp. 11-12). In other words, the Peircean model requires the presence of an insight for the generation of meaning. The semiotics of Peirce is suitable here because the triadic feature of the concept of the sign allows for the arbitrariness of sign interpretations, while Saussure’s dyadic view will exclude the interactive interpretants raised by a sign.

Accordingly, it could be deduced from Peircean semiotics and Spirn’s hypothesis that the conceptualization and understanding of the meaning generated by landscape depend on the thoughts of the viewer or the receiver of these messages. Different people view the same physical place, but each will conceptualize it according to his/her own thoughts. Hence, the analysis of the signification process of landscape in the novel in the light Peirce’s theory and Spirn’s approach will demonstrate its semiotic function as a medium for cultural signification.

My analysis will begin with the opening sentence of the novel which I believe to be an illustrative example of Peirce’s triadic sign model: “A narrow grave-yard in the heart of a bustling, indifferent city, seen from the windows of a gloomy-looking inn, is at no time an object of enlivening suggestion. . .” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 1). Peirce’s three elements of signification are present in this quotation: landscape is the object, and its elements are the signs that give rise to the interpretants. Moreover, the word “seen” suggests individual perception and arbitrary interpretation of landscape signs. Consequently, the meaning of landscape elements will depend on the perceiver. For example, Eugenia feels depressed by Boston’s gloomy landscape. It could be suggested that the narrow graveyard might have raised the thoughts, or interpretants, of the early burial of her dreams to find a suitable husband to compensate for her unsuccessful marriage. The erratic weather, a snowy drizzling

day in the spring season, might have appealed to her as an early sign of the lack of formality and rigidity in the American culture, and a prediction of the impossibility of adjustment. The white “tall wooden church-spire” that “rose high into the vagueness of the snow-flakes” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 2) might have aroused thoughts of discomfort in Eugenia’s mind since a “person feels more comfortable, important, or powerful when a landscape feature is smaller than normal scale” (Spirn, 1998, p. 227). Interestingly enough, this suggestive interpretation of how Eugenia might have understood the language of landscape, or “langscape”^v, to borrow Moslund’s (2011) term, explains her negative reaction to the surrounding environs; she speaks of Boston as a “dreadful country”, she hates and despises the “tall wooden church-spire” and describes it as “the ugliest thing” she has ever seen (James, [1878] 2008, p. 2). Hence, in the light of Peirce’s model, it could be suggested that all these objects have sent messages to Eugenia, her thoughts, acting as interpretants, have understood them as signifying revulsion and this, in turn, throws her “into a state of irritation”, and thus she decides to go back to Europe (James, [1878] 2008, pp. 2-3).

Felix’s positive reaction to New England’s landscape is another evidence on the hypothesis that Peirce’s semiotics is at function in James’ novel. Felix is an artist, and thus the way he perceives landscape is completely different from his sister. For instance, Felix sees New England’s erratic weather as “comical” and “charming”. Moreover, he admires the landscape of Boston and describes it as “amusing” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 5). Significantly, from the very beginning of the novel, he too demonstrates a special tendency of reading the language of New England’s landscape. Take as an example, in chapter 1 he interprets the ceasing of snow and the brightening of the sky as a promise of success and richness:

The snow was ceasing; it seemed to him that the sky had begun to brighten. ‘I count upon their being rich,’ he said at last, ‘and powerful,

and clever, and friendly, and elegant, and interesting, and generally delightful! Tu vas voir.’ And he bent forward and kissed his sister. ‘Look there!’ he went on. ‘As a potent, even while I speak, the sky is turning the colour of gold; the day is going to be splendid.’ (James, [1878] 2008, p. 9)

In this passage, Felix is perceiving the same physical place. Unlike his sister, he finds “plenty of local colour in the little puritan metropolis” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 12). The elements of landscape send him signs that give rise to thoughts or interpretations which he understands as being clues to success.

Another example of the semiotic function of landscape in the text is evident in the siblings’ different readings of the language of the dwelling offered to them for accommodation. As mentioned before, Eugenia finds it poor and starts to redecorate it. In fact, the semiotics of landscape is dramatized in Eugenia’s attempt to impose the landscape of her motherland with its relevant significations. Thus, it could be suggested that her redecoration of the house is a way of re-semiotizing the place. Significantly, the micro landscape of the cottage contrasts sharply with the macro landscape of New England and its inhabitants. Consequently, Eugenia’s axiomatic signs appear to be alien in the American context. Gertrude and Charlotte find the cottage odd, and it seems to them like stepping across into Europe itself (James, [1878] 2008, p. 48).

Felix, on the contrary, positively reacts to the idea of “having a house of his own”. He appreciates the meaning of the house in its context “among the apple trees”, the “infinitely rural” fields, and “their pastoral roughness” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 49). For him, the cottage signifies a promise of shelter from temporary lodgings and the insecurity of failing to pay due rents. These signs are understood by Felix who now enjoys a “greater sense of luxurious security” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 50).

The semiotic function of landscape can also be detected in the houses depicted in the novel. The architectural details of Wentworth’s and Acton’s houses show how landscape can be masterfully employed

in the process of signification where the houses act as objects signifying cultural issues and types of human figures. For example, Mr. Wentworth's house is described in a detailed architectural imagery that speaks volumes about his character.

Mr. Wentworth's house is a "large square house" located in the rural areas surrounding Boston city. The house has a "spacious garden" full of "flowering shrubs" and "neatly disposed plants":

The doors and windows of the large square house were all wide open, to admit the purifying sunshine, which lay in generous patches upon the floor of a wide, high, covered piazza. . . . A large white door, furnished with a highly-polished brass knocker, presented itself to the rural looking road, with which it was connected by a spacious pathway, paved with worn and cracked, but very clean, bricks. . . . All this was shining in the morning air, through which the simple details of the picture addressed themselves to the eyes as distinctly as the items of a 'sum' in addition. (James, [1878] 2008, pp. 14-15)

James then draws a comparison between the façade of the house, "large, clean faced house" (James, [1878] 2008, p. 30) and the physiognomy of the owner, a "tall, lean gentleman with a high forehead and a clean-shaven face" (James, [1878] 2008, p. 30). This analogy suggests that James counts on the "eye" of the perceiver to gather the components of the drawn picture of the house with all its details and sum them up to process and understand the identity of the owner of the house.

Mr. Wentworth is the head of the family and thus a "large square house" at the end of a "spacious garden" could be a sign for his "tremendously high-toned" character (James, [1878] 2008, p. 29), for his sense of "grand responsibility" (James, [1878] 2008, p. 31), and for his rigid and highly moral disposition. The wide-open doors and windows could stand for transparency and lack of privacy. Moreover, the description of the house places emphasis on the abundance of light and warmth which might stand for the qualities of simplicity, sincerity, truthfulness, honesty, and innocence that were highly valued in the

American culture of the 1830s. It could also be suggested that the puritan spirit of the owner is figuratively dramatized in the sense of quietude and stillness that has “offered a submissive medium to the sound of the distant church bell” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 14). Furthermore, the “neatly disposed plants”, the “highly polished brass knocker” and the “very clean bricks” (James, [1878] 2008, pp. 14-15) might be clues to the fact that Mr. Wentworth is “infinitely conscientious” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 31). In addition, the position of a large white door at the entrance of the house facing a rural road could be a suggestive sign for the pastoral naturalness of the dwellers. Accordingly, Wentworth’s house is loaded with signifying messages that suggest a symbolic connection between the meaning of the architectural features of the house and the identity of its owner.

Similarly, Acton’s house acts as a cultural signifier and offers a dialogic medium for the exchange of cultural themes and identity issues. It is described as a large square house that is expensively decorated with the

most delightful *chinoiseries* – trophies of his sojourn in the Celestial Empire: pagodas of ebony and cabinets of ivory; sculptured monsters, grinning and leering on chimney-pieces, in front of beautifully figured hand-screens; porcelain dinner-sets, gleaming behind the glass doors of mahogany buffets; large screens, in corners, covered with tense silk and embroidered with mandarins and dragons. . . . These things. . . . had a mixture of the homely and the liberal, and though it was almost a museum, the large, little-used rooms were fresh and clean as a well-kept dairy. (James, [1878] 2008, pp. 78-79)

In fact, Acton’s house is full of objects that signify the peculiarity of his character. Early in the novel, he is described as a rich fellow, “a man of the world” who “has been to China” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 30), and the “only person in the circle with no sense of oppression of any kind” (James, [1878] 2008, p. 51). Thus, Acton’s richness is reflected in the expensive ornaments and the sufficient material comfort. The “*chinoiseries*”, the “pagodas of ebony”, the “cabinets of ivory”, the

“sculptured monsters” and the “porcelain dinner sets” are clues to his cosmopolitan identity. Finally, the fresh and clean rooms could also stand for his honesty and truthfulness which put him in conflict with Eugenia’s performativity and deception.

Accordingly, the application of the Peircean sign model highlights the semiotic function of New England’s landscape. It shows how landscape generates meaning related to issues of transatlantic adventures and cultural encounters. It also demonstrates how the different elements of landscape, particularly houses and dwellings, act as signifiers for the American character whose cultural identity is best understood in terms of the semiotic process of landscape.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, James’ *The Europeans* is a work of art of a particular palatial setting. It is now evident that landscape is central to the thematic, factual, and artistic development of the novel. This study shows the creative skills of James in the manipulation, not of the textual material, but of the setting in shaping and representing his thematic raw material. The application of Eliot’s theory shows that landscape can play an aesthetic function in a work of art. In this novel, the conflict between the Old and the New Worlds is dramatized in the conflict between Eugenia and New England’s landscape which is communicated to the reader through an organized artistic pattern of landscape scenes and sudden climatic changes. Moreover, reading the novel in the light of Peirce’s semiotics shows that the elements of New England’s landscape are signifiers loaded with complex cultural ideas. The signification process of landscape in the text acts as a framework for cultural mediation. Finally, the idea that Eugenia’s projected emotions of culture shock are due to her personal interpretation of the “landscape” of New England indicates that the relationship between the aesthetic and the semiotic function of landscape is supplementary to fulfil the artistic requirements in this work of art.

To sum up, this interdisciplinary study moves the reader away from the detached contemplation of landscape as scenery and involves him/her in its complex cultural and sensuous experiences. At this moment, the reader appreciates the cultural themes within its perceptual framework, and thus landscape functions aesthetically and semiotically rather than conceptually. Semiotics is of help to the aesthetics because it shows the conditions under which all kinds of signs in landscape effectuate their reference to the “interpretants”. This interdisciplinary study also suggests that landscape in literary texts could have a dual function: both a physical environment that acts as a context for human-non-human interaction and, at the same time, a symbolic system of signs that are deeply embedded and conditioned by culture and society.

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Notes

Mellard proposes that landscape in literary texts serves a tropological functionⁱ performing like any other figure of speech. He suggests that all landscapes must be read within sets of tropes, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony.

For more critical studies on *The Europeans* read Bell, Millicent (1991). *Meaning*ⁱⁱ in *Henry James*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, Freedman, Johnathan. (Ed.). (1998). *The Cambridge companion to Henry James*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press and Lee, Brian. (1978). *The Novels of Henry James: A Study of Culture and consciousness*. London: Edward Arnold.

ⁱⁱⁱ I have chosen the term landscape to refer to the physical, cultural, and natural aspects of New England. The reason the term landscape is more suitable in this study than the terms place, environment, or space is best expressed in Denis Cosgrove's essay "Geography is Everywhere": landscape, unlike "place", "reminds us of our position in the scheme of nature. Unlike *environment* or *space*, it reminds us that only through human consciousness and reason is that scheme known to us, and only through technique can we participate as humans in it" (122).

Peirce was a contemporary to and a friend of Henry James. The two men spent the^{iv} winter of 1875 in Paris, 3 years before the publication of *The Europeans*. James wrote a letter to his mother on January 11, 1875, in which he mentioned Peirce as his close friend: "The only man I see familiarly here is C.S. Peirce with whom I generally dine a couple of times a week. He is a very good fellow – when he is not ill – humor, then he is intolerable. But, as William says, he is a man of genius" (James, *A Life in Letters* 63- 64). Is it more than

coincidence that about the same time Henry James was writing *The Europeans*, he spent two years in Paris with Peirce who had come up with the idea of semiotics? The dates of *The Europeans* (1878) and Peirce's semiotics (the 1860s) seem to suggest the possibility that James was influenced by Peirce's sign system. This hypothesis needs further investigation.

Moslund coins this term in her essay "The Presencing of Place in Literature" ^v where she points out that reading a literary work of a "more place-specific nature" entails a reading of the "langscaping" or the "landguage" of the work of art: "The fusion of "language" with "land" or "landscape" points to the way a work's language may be laden endowed with sensory energies with the natural and cultural symptomologies of its setting, that are intricately evocative of things like the topography, flora, fauna, and climate of the place, and, in that way, place may be said to have a form-giving influence on the work" (30-31).