



Reading the Alentejo Landscape: Literary Landscapes as a Pedagogical Tool to Foster Landscape Literacy

Joana Portela

University of Évora, Largo dos Colegiais, n. 2, 7004-5016, Évora, Portugal
joana.portela@uevora.pt

Abstract. Supposing that literary landscapes of the Alentejo (southern Portugal) in contemporary Portuguese fiction could be a common ground to activate interdisciplinary dialogues between the field of Environmental Humanities and that of Landscape Studies, my dissertation aims to examine the perceptions of the Alentejo's rural landscapes over the last 150 years among 16 Portuguese writers who have inhabited the region. It seeks to intertwine humanist approaches of ecocriticism with aesthetic and scientific perspectives from landscape knowledge. Ingold's ecological anthropology (2000) and Spirm's "The Language of Landscape" (1998) are my theoretical references in approaching literary excerpts of landscape representations. Adopting a phenomenological approach, inscribed in material and affective ecocriticism, 1,290 excerpts from 65 literary works are studied, drawing on the expertise of landscape architecture. As a corollary of this research, it is concluded that literary landscapes are a promising pedagogical tool to foster landscape literacy among children and young people through affective attention. The rich legacy of literary excerpts is fertile for developing a comprehensive and sympathetic understanding of the landscapes from the beginning of schooling. In order to promote the valorisation, preservation, and development of sustainable landscapes, it is suggested that teacher training programs should incorporate literary landscapes as a unit of study. As an instrument of literary mediation aligned with the European Landscape Convention (Council of Europe, 2000), the proposal raises social awareness about the value of landscapes, including them in the training of teachers and educators, fostering a culture of landscape literacy and civic engagement.

Keywords: Alentejo, landscape literacy, environmental humanities, landscape studies.

1 Problem Outline and Research Questions

This research emerged within the framework of the European Landscape Convention (ELC), which defines landscape as "an area, as perceived by people, whose character is the result of the action and interaction of natural and/or human factors" and urges "to recognize landscapes in law as an essential component of people's surroundings, an expression of the diversity of their shared cultural and natural heritage, and a foundation

of their identity” (Council of Europe, 2000, p. 2). The ELC foregrounds landscape as perceived by people, and its core principles include education, awareness-raising and capacity-building (Article 6) to enhance landscape literacy. This concept introduces the idea of landscape as a readable language (Spirn, 1998) and refers to the ability to read, understand, interpret, and responsibly engage with landscapes as complex socio-ecological and cultural systems. On the other hand, ecocritic scholars (Glottfelty & Fromm, 1996; Buell, 2005) have argued on how reading a literary landscape may result in an inquiry into humanity’s inter-relationship with the surrounding world.

Supposing that the literary landscapes in contemporary Portuguese fiction could be a common ground to activate interdisciplinary dialogues between the field of environmental humanities and that of landscape studies, the research aims to study perceptions of the Alentejo’s rural landscapes to seek answers for several questions: How has literature contributed to our understanding of the Alentejo’s landscapes over the last 150 years? What ecological and cultural components may be drawn from authors who have written about the Alentejo? What identifying features of the Alentejo’s landscapes remain constant across different writers? How can landscape memories contribute to a strategy for enhancing the landscape? Could literary landscapes, as cultural representations of territory, promote landscape literacy and education by encouraging perception, interpretation, and informed engagement with the landscape? The research seeks to intertwine humanist approaches of ecocriticism with aesthetic and scientific perspectives from landscape knowledge. Tuan’s topophilia (1974), Ingold’s ecological anthropology (2000), and the holistic and systemic thought underlining the works of landscape architects such as Telles (2016) and Spirn (1998) are my theoretical references in approaching literary excerpts of landscape representations.

2 Methodological Approach

Three criteria – geographic (Alentejo Interior), chronological (1875-2025), and biographical (personal experience of inhabiting the region) – were taken into consideration when building an Alentejo literary *corpus* from the broad LITESCAPE database¹ and the body of contemporary Portuguese literature. This resulted in 1,290 literary excerpts of geo-referenced landscape descriptions taken from 65 literary works written by 16 authors. The content analysis was complemented in two ways: for each of the 1,290 excerpts, an individual file was created, and the first and standardized content analysis was performed based on five categories, 27 themes, and a variable number of landscape objective descriptors. This reading grid was then complemented by a second round of close reading of each excerpt, adopting an ecocritical perspective in the approach to the *corpus* with a focus on the materiality of the landscape, its cultural meanings, but also on the relationship between humans and the environment they inhabit and perceive. Additionally, a phenomenological perspective was used to allow for the consideration of other dimensions (corporeal, sensorial, affective), not covered by the predefined

¹ <https://litescape.ielt.fcsh.unl.pt/>

analysis categories. Embracing the phenomenological method implies, above all, considering how subjectivity and landscape are intertwined in lived experience.

3 Key Findings

A cross-sectional reading of literary landscapes, combining a phenomenological analysis of subjective experience with a content analysis of the objective components of the landscape, revealed five key findings:

- Literary landscapes provide a reliable repository for the inventory and characterisation of natural-cultural values that constitute the identity and invariant features of the Alentejo's landscapes, allowing certain distinctive materials (stone, clay, cork, wool, honey) to be highlighted over time, along with their metamorphoses, entanglements, and flows, as themes of particular attention and current vulnerability.
- Literature has a great potential as a source of relevant information for objective/scientific knowledge, for subjective layers of meaning and holistic understanding of the Alentejo's landscapes. The rich legacy of literary excerpts is fertile for developing a comprehensive, affective, and empathetic understanding of very particular landscapes of earth, water, air, fire and silence.
- Reading the Alentejo's landscapes reveals a distinct poetics of rurality. This poetics is a sensitive conception of the world – sensitive because it is sensory, and it is endowed with sensitivity. The poetic material of the *corpus* reveals a common pattern, regardless of geography or author: a poetics of matter embedded in real contexts.
- Literary landscapes provide a deeper understanding of the various ecosystems of the Alentejo, which are more than just a physical or agricultural area. They are an inhabited 'living landscape' that evokes memories, coexistence, ecological practices, and a sense of belonging. Reading and telling the meanings of landscapes make literary landscapes a cornerstone for landscape literacy, but also for landscape care.
- Writers capture the sense of (dis)pleasure evoked by the landscape in their narratives, without losing sight of the place where things are always in a process of becoming and live on a human scale. There is a qualitative pattern perceived in the Alentejo *corpus*, from which two values stand out: the human scale of the landscape and an ethic scale of restraint. The bursting of the natural and the human scale has nothing to do with the Alentejo's identity, which has managed to maintain the restraint that other regions have lost. The slow pace inscribed in clay, cork, wool, or honey landscapes is an ethic of restraint of time, closer to the rhythm of life and natural fibres. There is a lesson to be learned from what remains in the Alentejo's landscapes, which confirms the premise that landscape is the essential place of dwelling. Landscapes are mistaken for scenery when they are not wholly perceived as spaces of experience.

4 Discussion of how the Research Connects to Education for Sustainability

I begin with two tenets: i) education should promote a deep understanding of landscapes and their intricate relationships (Orr, 1992; Spirn, 1998); ii) personal commitment to the landscape is crucial for its sustainable development (Council of Europe, 2006). My research concludes that literary landscapes present models of attentiveness towards landscape as a whole, aligned with the holistic approach of the ELC. It advocates the adoption of measures to raise awareness among civil society. The Portuguese National Policy on Landscape and Architecture provides for the extension of landscape literacy to various levels of education. It recommends integrating such themes into school programmes at various levels of non-specialised education, particularly in primary and secondary school curricula, to stimulate a culture of citizenship. In this sense, the inclusion of an innovative cross-curricular unit about literary landscapes in teacher training programmes constitutes a proposal for literary mediation as a means of promoting sustainable landscapes in the future. Given the potential to constitute a common ground for areas of knowledge such as literature, geography, and natural sciences, literary landscapes are a privileged and diverse heritage for an integrated, interdisciplinary, and affective vision in school curricula. It is a pedagogical tool to foster landscape literacy among young people through affective attention, because, unlike non-fiction texts, literary narratives cultivate experiential rather than merely descriptive knowledge, helping students develop emotional connections that have a greater impact on their willingness to commit in ecological stewardship. Moreover, excerpts concerning the regional identity of landscapes redirect the students' attention to their own landscape; they may become aware how they function as entangled systems and may cultivate responsible relationships to landscapes as something they can care about and identify themselves with, as those are co-constitutive of human identity and culture.

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