

Article

A Study of the Picturesque Aesthetics in *Waverley*

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Abstract: In his foundational historical novel *Waverley*, Walter Scott masterfully depicts Scotland's rugged landscapes, distinctive characters, and traditional costumes from a profoundly picturesque perspective, thereby highlighting the nation's "primitive imagery" and inherent exoticism. This deliberate artistic choice not only echoes the prevailing picturesque aesthetics of the nineteenth century but also significantly deepens the shaping and global dissemination of Scotland's national image. Through Scott's evocative prose, the natural landscapes, historical figures, and cultural artifacts in the novel are endowed with a romantic and mysterious aura. Consequently, these elements transcend mere background details, becoming essential visual codes for constructing a cohesive Scottish national identity and preserving its rich cultural heritage. Furthermore, the protagonist, Edward *Waverley*, functions as more than a passive spectator; he acts as an "alien" observer who deeply penetrates the Scottish Highlands. As an outsider, he appreciates the sublime vastness of the Scottish moors, the melancholic dilapidation of ancient castles, and the vibrant splendor of clan costumes through a highly stylized picturesque lens. This perspective effectively filters the harsh, often violent socio-political realities of the Jacobite rising into a captivating aesthetic spectacle designed for the reader's gaze. Ultimately, *Waverley* undergoes a profound emotional and psychological conversion, navigating the complex tension between cultural distance and newfound intimacy, which underscores the transformative power of aesthetic experience in historical literature.

Keywords: Walter Scott; historical fiction; picturesque aesthetics; national identity; scottish literature; cultural heritage

1. Introduction

From the late 18th century to the early 19th century, picturesque aesthetics became a dominant cultural trend in Britain, emphasizing a form of beauty that was particularly suited for artistic representation [1, 2]. This aesthetic approach focused on irregular compositions, dramatic contrasts of light and shadow, and a visual tension that could evoke deep emotional responses. The Scottish Highlands, with their rugged landscapes and unique cultural elements, provided an ideal subject for this aesthetic. Scott, recognizing this compatibility, creatively adapted picturesque principles in his literary work, particularly in *Waverley*. Through his narrative, Scott sought to capture a pivotal moment in the cultural memory of Scotland, using picturesque aesthetics as a central artistic tool to bring this historical period to life. This approach not only visualized the Highlands but also imbued them with emotional resonance, fostering a sense of nostalgia and admiration among readers.

Scott's ability to evoke such vivid imagery had a profound impact on his audience. Readers were inspired to become travelers, seeking to experience the landscapes and cultural sites described in his works. They purchased illustrated books, landscape paintings, and other visual representations to immerse themselves in the picturesque journeys Scott depicted. For many, these descriptions transcended mere depictions of scenery, serving as a medium to explore deeper emotional, cognitive, and cultural dimensions. In *Waverley*, Scott's portrayal of the Highlands went beyond simple landscape descriptions. He employed picturesque aesthetics to create a literary representation that not only highlighted the natural beauty of the region but also evoked empathy and

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admiration for its cultural identity. This external gaze transformed the Highlands into an aesthetic object, allowing readers to engage with the region through a lens of safe nostalgia.

Scott's use of picturesque principles extended beyond landscapes to include the depiction of characters and their attire. Much like a painter composing a portrait, Scott meticulously crafted his characters, paying close attention to both their inner personalities and their external appearances. By doing so, he transformed these characters into symbolic representations, rich with meaning and ready to be visually and emotionally appreciated. The contrast between Scotland and England was further emphasized through these depictions, reinforcing the distinctiveness of the Scottish nation. Through this artistic approach, Scott not only celebrated the unique identity of the Highlands but also invited readers to engage with its cultural and historical significance on a deeper level. This deliberate construction of a picturesque effect allowed Scott to bridge the gap between artistic representation and emotional connection, solidifying his role as a key figure in the literary and cultural appreciation of Scotland.

2. Picturesque Landscapes

The picturesque landscapes in the novel encapsulate the historical conflicts and cultural differences between Scotland and Britain, while also reflecting the author's emotional perceptions. The late 18th century and the entirety of the 19th century marked a period of significant upheaval and transformation across Europe. Events such as the French Revolution, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution brought about rapid shifts, creating tensions between tradition and modernity, reason and emotion, as well as humanity and nature within European society. During this intense phase of industrialization, Scotland's Highland clan system, traditional customs, and values faced immense challenges. These changes deeply affected Scott, evoking a profound sense of nostalgia for the past and a yearning to preserve the cultural essence of the Highlands.

The landscape descriptions in *Waverley* are undeniably extensive and vividly picturesque [2]. The structure of the observer's visual field is framed to emphasize the natural representation of the scenery, creating a staged effect that allows the viewer to engage with the landscape as a safe and detached observer. Whether the features are sublime, dangerous, or mysterious, the framing ensures that the observer remains secure, viewing the scene from a distance. A variety of descriptive modifiers can be extracted from the novel, including wild, magnificent, picturesque, and mysterious. Scott deliberately selects scenes that inherently embody picturesque qualities, such as ruined castles, rugged gorges, roaring waterfalls, misty lakes, and desolate marshes. These landscapes were highly sought after by 18th-century picturesque tourists, who valued their aesthetic appeal and romantic allure.

In the passage "First Entry into the Highlands," the landscape descriptions emphasize rugged and irregular terrain, fleeting light and shadow, and rich, somber colors [3, 4]. These elements establish the Highlands as a quintessential model of the "primitive" picturesque, inviting readers to immerse themselves in an "other" world alongside *Waverley*. As the narrative progresses, exotic scenes unfold one after another, featuring rugged roads, winding streams, protruding granite, and gnarled roots that define the wild and untamed beauty of the Highlands. These landscapes stand in stark contrast to the neat and elegant manor settings of southern England, implicitly highlighting cultural oppositions such as civilization versus primitivism and order versus passion. This juxtaposition enriches the narrative by offering a deeper exploration of the cultural and aesthetic dimensions of the Highlands.

The sense of otherness inherent in these landscapes naturally evokes a delightful yearning in the observer, yet this pleasure is often contingent upon the observer's sense of safety. Pure danger and unbridled wildness might inspire awe, but they are tempered by the author's efforts to attach beautiful imaginings to the scenery. Scott modifies elements that might be deemed unfit for human aesthetics, ensuring that the landscapes bring pleasure to the viewer. His mastery in rendering light and shadow, using sunlight and moonlight, is particularly evident in descriptions such as "the setting sun cast a

brilliant hue over the objects around *Waverley*." While images of shrubs, gravel, and moss convey the raw primitiveness of the Highlands, romantic and grand modifiers transform these scenes into visions of fairyland beauty, blending realism with idealized aesthetics [5].

For the British people of the time, who rebelled against the neatness of urban landscapes and yearned for the untamed wilderness, such picturesque depictions of the Scottish Highlands were irresistibly captivating. These landscapes sparked a desire to explore the Highlands, offering an aestheticized representation that filtered and sublimated the historical traumas of the 18th century. These traumas included the defeat of the Jacobite uprising, the collapse of the clan system, and the tragedies that befell the Highland communities [6, 7]. The choice to depict picturesque landscapes reflects Scott's deep national consciousness and his commitment to reviving the cultural heritage of the Scottish Highlands. Furthermore, it underscores the integration of the Highlands into British rule, transforming them into a fashionable and romanticized destination. The aestheticization of the Highlands allowed them to be perceived not as sites of historical conflict but as sources of misty sentiment, antiquated customs, and comfortable archaism, aligning with broader cultural trends of the early 19th century.

3. Picturesque Characters

If a literary work contained only landscape descriptions, it would lack dynamism and fail to engage readers fully; stories are the captivating core, making the characters who enact them essential. This chapter briefly examines how Scott employs picturesque techniques to aestheticize two of the most representative Highland characters—Fergus and Flora. By presenting Fergus and his sister as a tragic and visually striking tableau to readers, particularly those from the dominant Lowland and English cultural spheres, the historical realities of violent and politically charged conflicts are transformed into an aestheticized object of sympathy, admiration, and reflection. This transformation allows readers to engage with the narrative on an emotional level while distancing themselves from the harsh realities of history [8, 9].

As noted in discussions of human affinity for nature, once societies become more refined and complex, they begin to appreciate the simplicity of nature. In early Britain, attitudes toward wilderness and its inhabitants were starkly different from contemporary perspectives. Wilderness was often perceived as malevolent, and those who lived within it were demonized. However, as technological advancements and human conquest of nature progressed, previously inaccessible and primitive areas gradually lost their threatening aura. This shift in perception transformed the wilderness from a feared domain into an idyllic Eden, a place that humanity began to yearn for as a refuge from the complexities of modern life. This evolution in attitudes reflects broader cultural changes in how societies view the natural world and its relationship to human civilization.

Similarly, this shift in perception extends to the portrayal of "savages," who are increasingly endowed with noble and admirable qualities in literature and art. Integrating elements of natural beauty into artistic representation, it has been noted that nature in its raw state serves as the domain of the naturalist rather than the painter. This suggests that an idealized landscape is not a mere replication of nature but rather a creative interpretation that selects and enhances the most beautiful aspects of the natural world through imagination and refined artistic sensibilities. This approach underscores the importance of aesthetic judgment in transforming raw nature into a picturesque vision that resonates with cultural ideals and artistic tastes.

When major characters are introduced, Scott crafts detailed and evocative portraits of them, akin to a painter creating a full-length masterpiece. Fergus is depicted with bravery and dignity, while Flora is characterized by classical tragic beauty. Their physical features, postures, and costumes are described in meticulous detail, forming vivid and unforgettable images that linger in the reader's mind. These descriptions serve not only to establish their individual identities but also to elevate them as symbolic figures within the narrative, embodying the cultural and aesthetic ideals of their time.

Fergus is introduced as a hunter, embodying a wild yet dignified persona. His appearance is striking, with majestic eagle feathers adorning his hat, a hunting dog by his side, and a resolute expression on his dark-skinned face [10]. His strong physique is accentuated by his exotic attire, which sets him apart from traditional aesthetic ideals. The roughness of his appearance is celebrated, with his thick hair described as more natural and beautiful than the artificial perfection found in urban settings. This portrayal aligns with the picturesque aesthetic, which values the untamed and rugged qualities of nature and humanity as sources of beauty and inspiration.

In contrast, Flora's depiction is more idealized, emphasizing her ethereal qualities. She is introduced in a scene where *Waverley* marvels at a waterfall landscape, her presence enhancing the natural beauty of the environment [11]. Flora is described as a "female sorceress who created Eden" in *Waverley's* perception, her appearance characterized by a unique blend of roughness and elegance. Her voice, distinct and resonant, complements her loyalty to the dynastic cause, further distinguishing her from the conventional image of English housewives of the time. Flora is portrayed as a near-perfect goddess, embodying the sublime, the beautiful, and a picturesque sense of melancholy that adds depth to her character.

From the perspective of picturesque aesthetics, characters and landscapes are deeply interconnected, a symbiotic relationship that is vividly illustrated in *Waverley*. In psychoanalytic interpretations, certain landforms are often associated with gendered symbolism: towering and protruding features like mountains are linked to masculine power, while sunken and secluded features like valleys are associated with feminine qualities. In the novel, Fergus's bravery and untamed spirit as a Highland chief resonate with the rugged mountains he inhabits, while Flora's picturesque melancholy harmonizes with the secluded waterfall valley where she resides. This interplay between characters and their environments enriches the narrative, with landscapes serving as external manifestations of the characters' inner qualities and spirits.

Despite their noble qualities, Fergus meets a tragic end through execution, and Flora emerges not only as a figure of beauty but also as the last singer and martyr of Gaelic culture. Both characters are shaped as "noble savages," conforming to the aesthetic preferences of the 18th century, yet their fates underscore the inexorable march of modern civilization. Through picturesque depictions of these Scottish heroes, Scott explores romantic elements within national culture, expressing a profound sense of nostalgia for a heroic past. This literary strategy allows Scott to reconcile his inner conflict: his romantic longing for Scotland's cultural heritage and his rational acknowledgment of the United Kingdom's historical progress. The sacrifice of these picturesque characters is portrayed as both aesthetically heroic and historically inevitable, reflecting the tension between romantic idealism and rationalist perspectives in the narrative.

4. Picturesque Costumes

In *Waverley*, costumes serve as more than mere external markers of characters' identities and historical contexts; they are also significant carriers of picturesque aesthetics at a detailed level and core visual symbols for constructing Scotland's national image and cultural identity. Through meticulous depictions of Scottish Highland costumes, particularly tartan, Scott elevates these garments into cultural icons imbued with a strong pictorial sense, emotional resonance, and historical memory. These elements collectively contribute to shaping a vivid and enduring image of Scotland [5, 12]. By emphasizing the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of Highland attire, Scott not only enriches the narrative texture of his novel but also indirectly influences the broader cultural representation of Scotland, as seen in historical events such as King George IV's promotion of Scottish culture.

The most ceremonious description of costumes in the novel centers on the episode where *Waverley*, after meeting the Prince Regent at Holyrood Palace, promptly purchases and dons a full set of clan tartan attire. This act of changing clothes symbolizes a pivotal transformation for the protagonist, marking his shift from a passive observer to an active

participant in the unfolding events. With vivid and picturesque detail, Scott captures this moment, freezing the protagonist's new image in the reader's mind while simultaneously immortalizing the historical scene of "the prince in tartan" gathering with clan chiefs at Holyrood Palace. This literary depiction, rooted in historical reality yet elevated through artistic imagination, becomes a powerful cultural image that resonates deeply within the collective memory of Scotland. By intertwining historical authenticity with literary creativity, Scott crafts a scene that transcends its narrative function to become a symbol of national identity and pride.

This literary image catalyzed a historic "reverse representation" following the publication of *Waverley*, as it gained favor with King George IV. Scott, acutely aware of the influence of literary memory on real-world politics, played a pivotal role in shaping the cultural narrative during the king's visit to Scotland in 1822. As the chief consultant for the ceremonial arrangements, Scott emphasized the centrality of Highland culture in all public events. Highlanders' traditional attire, including two-edged broadswords, tartan kilts, dirks, pistols, bagpipes, and tartan patterns, became emblematic of the occasion. The official proclamation issued for the king's visit recommended a uniform dress code for attendees, featuring blue coats, white waistcoats, pale yellow or white trousers, and hats adorned with the St. Andrew's Cross. This deliberate emphasis on visual uniformity and cultural symbolism underscored the role of costumes as a unifying force, transforming them into a medium for expressing collective identity and allegiance.

The carefully orchestrated "Tartan Festival" during King George IV's visit to Scotland effectively recreated and reinterpreted the historical scene depicted in the novel. Scott actively promoted the wearing of Scottish tartan costumes, not only by donning them himself but also by encouraging prominent Scottish clan chiefs to wear distinctive kilts bearing their clan emblems at official events. King George IV, embracing this cultural revival, prepared two sets of Scottish attire, including a coat, hat, tartan kilt, and tights, featuring the tartan pattern associated with the House of Stuart. This grand political performance transformed tartan, once a symbol of division and rebellion, into a visual emblem of unity between the monarch and his subjects [13]. By leveraging the symbolic power of costumes, Scott effectively positioned King George IV as the "clan chief" of all Scots, demonstrating how the micro-identity mechanisms explored in the novel could be scaled up to construct a cohesive national identity. This transformation highlights the interplay between literary imagination and political strategy in reshaping cultural narratives.

The deeper significance of "picturesque costumes" in *Waverley* lies in Scott's ability to complete a comprehensive aesthetic cycle that bridges literary imagination and political practice [4, 8]. Within the novel, costumes serve as highly evocative visual symbols and templates for historical scenarios, enriching the narrative with layers of meaning. Beyond the text, Scott's active involvement in real-world events demonstrates how these literary elements can be adapted and performed on the political stage. Costumes evolve from mere aesthetic devices used to enhance character portrayal and atmosphere into a central medium that connects literature with political action. They play a crucial role in reconstructing historical memory and forging a unified national identity. Through his writing and practical application of "picturesque costumes," Scott successfully redefined tartan, liberating it from its historical associations with conflict and rebellion. Instead, he imbued it with a renewed vitality, framed within the romantic aesthetic and the political context of the United Kingdom. This transformation underscores the enduring power of cultural symbols to shape collective identity and historical consciousness.

5. Conclusion

Walter Scott's novel *Waverley* exemplifies the use of picturesque aesthetics to craft a vivid and romanticized portrayal of Scotland's Highland landscapes, characters, and cultural artifacts. By transforming rugged terrains, tragic heroic figures, and iconic tartan costumes into cohesive visual spectacles, Scott effectively reimagines historical and cultural realities through an aesthetic lens. This approach not only constructs a distinctive

image of Scotland as a land imbued with exotic charm and cultural richness but also serves as a medium for addressing deeper historical and political dynamics. Through the picturesque, Scott filters the complexities of Scotland's historical traumas and cultural conflicts into a romanticized narrative that resonates with broader audiences. This aestheticization transcends mere literary storytelling, becoming a tool for cultural intervention that shapes perceptions of Scottish identity and contributes to the broader integration of British national identity. Furthermore, Scott's work catalyzed a literary tourism phenomenon across Europe during the 19th century, as readers sought to experience firsthand the landscapes and cultural elements depicted in his novels. The implications of this are profound, as it highlights the power of literature to influence not only cultural identity but also economic and social practices. Future research could explore how Scott's picturesque techniques compare to similar aesthetic strategies in other national literatures, as well as their long-term impact on cultural tourism and identity formation in Scotland and beyond.

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