

The Analysis of the Bookshop from the Perspective of Space Theory

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Abstract: *The Bookshop* is the representative work of Penelope Fitzgerald, a 20th century British female writer. It tells the story of Florence Green, the heroine, who successfully realized her dream of opening the only bookshop in Hardborough town. However, because of various obstacles, the bookshop had to close. After the death of her husband in the war, Florence moved to Hardborough with the dream of opening what would be the only bookshop in Hardborough. After unremitting efforts, she bought the old house in the town that had been idle for many years, and transformed it into a bookshop. With the help of her assistant, Christine, and the advice of Mr. Brundish, the bookshop grew and expanded into a lending library. But Mrs. Gamart was so intent on turning the old house into an art center for exhibitions and lectures that she used her nephew's bureaucratic connections to introduce a bill to make the Old House her own. In the end, Florence's bookshop closed down. Faced with bureaucratic oppression and apathy in the town, she finally left Hardborough. Florence lived in the small town of Hardborough and ran the Old House Bookshop, which is a very representative spatial intention in the book. Space is the place where power runs, and the interaction between space and human makes space have a great impact on human physiology and psychology. This paper analyzes the physical space, social space and mental space, and discusses the space embodied in Florence's realization of her dream of opening a bookshop and the process of the eventual failure of the bookshop.

1. Introduction

Penelope Fitzgerald is one of the most concise and meaningful writers in contemporary British literature, whose novels “do not show the ambition of the world, and write people and things in a casual way, but very relevant and in-depth”. She has written a total of nine novels. She won the Booker Prize in 1979 for *Offshore*. Her most popular novel, *The Blue Flower*, was named Book of the Year nineteen times in 1995 and won the National Book Award.

Based on the novel of the same name by Penelope Fitzgerald, a famous British contemporary female writer, the story takes place in 1959 in a small British town. It mainly tells the story of Florence, who opened an old house bookstore in the town after her husband died in the war. This bookstore allowed the narrow local people to access to many excellent literary works, enriched their lives and broadened their horizons, but at the same time, it was obstructed by various forces from powerful lawyers, banks and some townspeople, and finally ushered in the tragic ending that the bookstore was transferred and the female owner was expelled from the town.

The Bookshop, a novel by Penelope Fitzgerald, tells the story of the heroine, Florence's opening a bookshop in the town of Hardborough, but ending up in failure. The importance of the space begins to emerge with the modernistic development. The Space Theory provides not only a reconstructed critic field but also a theoretical cognitive perspective. The Old House Bookshop in this book, opened by the heroine, can be interpreted from the perspective of Space Theory.

2. Literature Review

Space theory was put forward by Lefebvre in the early 20th century. With the development of literature, space theory has been applied to literary analysis. However, *The Bookshop* has rarely been analyzed by space theory, therefore it is a topic worth further development and has certain practical and theoretical significance.

The author of Space Theory is the French thinker Henri Lefebvre. He pointed out that space is dynamic, a process of building and reorganizing social order and social relations. "Space is not empty, but often contains some kind of definition."^[10] He emphasized the close relationship between space and society. Space is the product of society, and society also belongs to the theoretical category of space.

In the past, space was regarded as a static and empty existence. Compared with time, space is completely ignored. However, as people gradually enter the modern society, the temporality of history is no longer so obvious as before. Diachronic research has gradually been replaced by synchronic research. And space just embodies the characteristics of synchrony.

Space is no longer dead, rigid, non-dialectical and static. Under the influence of social space theorists, literary critics have changed their understanding of spatial position and spatial discourse.^[7] Interpreting literary works from the perspective of space is helpful to further understand the author's creation psychology and the intention of portraying characters, and thus provides a new perspective for analyzing the narrative structure, character image and social value of literary works. Social space in literary works is often manifested as the confrontation between two ideas or the oppression and resistance between two groups, and plays an important role in the expression and transmission of the theme.^[8] Space Theory, which flourished at the end of the 20th century, has shifted the study of texts from the static temporal dimension to the dynamic spatial dimension.^[4] Lefebvre, the main representative of space theory, pointed out that "space is not a concept of usual geometry and traditional geography, but a process of reorganizing social relations and constructing social order in practice." It can be seen that Space Theory has expanded from the field of geography to the field of sociology. The social process operates through space, and various spatial metaphors, such as position, boundary, edge, core, flow, etc. It shows where the boundary is maintained with the counterbalance, and the boundary mechanism of the identification of subjects with the construction of self and otherness.^[6]

Lefebvre put forward the trinity theory of space, that is, physical space, social space and mental space. Physical space, also called "space practice", refers to the universe and nature that we are familiar with. In literary works, it mainly refers to the physical and natural environment where the story takes place. The change of physical space provides the basic conditions for the change of social space and mental space.

Social space is also called "spatial representation". "Social space contains a large number of objects... Therefore, such 'objects' are not only things, but also relationships."^[10] Social space is the space formed when people communicate with others in society, and is the sum of various relationships in society. It is "an experiential space that is dominated and therefore passively attempted to change and adapt through imagination, which overrides physical space and symbolically uses objects in physical space".^[10] Specifically, social space encompasses all the relations of social productive forces.

In social space, there is the struggle to make the living environment constantly change through cognition and intention. Social space provides breadth for the development of a novel's plot.^[9] Mental space, also called “representational space”, is created on the basis of physical concepts and is related to people's mental thinking. Mental space contains the cultural and symbolic meaning of a particular society. Space is “an almost indistinguishable domain of ideology and knowledge”.^[10] Lefebvre argued that the mental space of a literary work is influenced by the social relations in the social space and the environment in the physical space, so there is a close relationship between them, and that the mental space is a conceptual space.

In addition, Lefebvre also believed that the knowledge of space should be embodied through the combination of physical living space, social living space and mental living space, so that the subject can move easily in each space. Based on this, this paper will interpret *The Bookshop* from the three dimensions of physical living space, social living space and mental living space.

In 2016, in his article “The Loss of Black Subjectivity: A Brief Analysis of *The Bluest Eye* under the Space Theory”, Li Junfeng used space theory to analyze the material living space, social living space and spiritual living space of black subjects. In the same year, Qi Shanshan in her “Analysis of *Jane Eyre* from the Perspective of Space Theory” analyzed *Jane Eyre* from the three spaces of the Red Room, Lowood school and the attic with Space Theory. In the same year, Li Meiling in her “Analysis of *Heaven* from the perspective of Space Theory” analyzed the book from the three perspectives of physical space, social space and mental space. In 2022, in her “Research on the Conflict in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* from the Perspective of Space Theory”, Li Ningxin studied the conflicts reflected in this book from three perspectives: social space, family space and mental space. In 2023, Zhang Danqi and Xu Dan, in their article “The Realization of Strickland's Self-worth in *The Moon and Sixpence*: From the perspective of Lefebvre's Space Theory”, analyzed the realization of Strickland's self-worth from three perspectives of space theory. In the same year, Zhang Danqi and Xu Dan, in their article “Katie's Self-Consciousness Awakening in *The Veil* from the Perspective of Lefebvre's space Theory”, analyzed Katie's awakening of self-conscious through the three perspectives of Space Theory.

This paper reviews the space theory and its development, and contributes to the application of space theory in literature. It aims to take space theory as the entry point of *The Bookshop*, make a new interpretation of it, and strive to make some constructive supplements for the academic research on *The Bookshop*.

3. Physical Space

Lefebvre, the father of the critical theory of daily Life, believes that the way of human habitation is fundamentally spatial, and the production of space and place, territory and region, environment and habitation is the main living activity of human beings.

The physical space in *The Bookshop* is mainly represented by the small island town of Hardborough and the Old House Bookshop. From a macro point of view, the Old House Bookshop is actually a microcosm of the small town of Hardborough. Its old, closed and damp characteristics precisely correspond to the environmental conditions of Hardborough. On a micro point of view, the major story lines revolve around these two spaces.

Florence, the heroine, moves to Hardborough after her husband dies in the war. Years of boredom and Florence's love of books make it her long held dream to open a bookshop, which will be the only one in the town. The town itself was an island between sea and river, muttering and drawing into itself as soon as it felt the cold. Hardborough, the setting for this story, is as inaccessible as its location, and its people live in seclusion. And the people of Hardborough live a simple and traditional life.

The Old House Bookshop, an important location where the whole story unfolds, is an old house

with many years of history. As no one has lived or rented shops for many years, the old house is very dilapidated, wet all the time, and the infrastructure is very backward. Inside the old house was the large front room, the back house kitchen, and upstairs a bedroom under a sloping ceiling. Not adjoining, but two streets away on the foreshore, stood the oyster shed which went with the property and Florence had hoped to use as a warehouse for the reserve stock.

In this old house that has been abandoned for many years, there are often poltergeists (called rappers in Hardborough) making noise, which adds a lot of mystery to this old house. From the analysis of physical space, the bookshop that Florence will operate is open and receptive, which is exactly in contrast to Hardborough, a closed and backward town. Therefore, in a sense, if Hardborough cannot be changed, then the bookshop opened by Florence is doomed to fail.

4. Social Space

According to Lefebvre's social space theory, human space is no longer a purely natural space, but a humanized space, a product of social organization, social interaction and social experience, and a tool for human beings in a specific natural context. The third space, constructed by space and power, covers the distorted human nature under the geographical space, literary expression and power mechanism.^[1]Space is not an abstract noun, but a relational verb. Social space has social attributes and embodies social relations.

According to Lefebvre, "social space contains not only objects, but also the interdependent relations among objects and the relative order or disorder among them." This statement shows that Lefebvre emphasizes not only the interrelations among social entities, but also the interrelations among members of a hierarchical society in a dynamic hierarchical social space.

As one of the products of history, city is the greatest concentration of social rights and culture.^[2]In the Old House Bookshop, Florence occupies a central position. Her ten-year-old assistant, Christine Gippings, a student in the town, came to the bookshop after school every day. Christine has an excellent ability to catalogue books and was greatly helpful to the bookshop. The customers in the bookshop often took care of the business of Florence. Their kindness promoted the development of the bookshop and laid the foundation for the later development of turning the bookshop into a lending library. Mr.Brundish, an old man of the respected upper class who lived in Hardborough, had written to encourage Florence at the time of the bookshop's opening, and was very appreciative of the idea. As the Old House Bookshop developed into a lending library, Florence wrote to him for advice, asking if *Lolita* was a good book and whether it should be brought into the bookshop. Mr. Brundish had only one conversation with Florence, but he considered her as a friend. And when Mrs. Gamart used her connections to introduce a new law to make the old house available to her, he went to Florence's side. Unfortunately, on his way back, Mr. Brundish fell into a ravine and died.

In the context of Hardborough, under the strong oppression of powerful men, Florence is on the fringe of society. Mrs. Gamart was the wife of General Gamart. At the beginning of the story, Mrs. Gamart wanted to turn the Old House Bookshop into an art center for art exhibitions and various lectures, so she invited Florence to the party they often held, hoping to persuade Florence to choose another shop to run the bookshop, but Florence refused her and left the party. When she wanted to borrow money from the bank, the bank staff snobbishly refused. When she asked someone to repair the infrastructure of the old house, they took the keys from Mr. Raven and entered it without her permission and started the repairs. When she returned, she was shocked by the rude act. In Hardborough, Florence is alone and helpless. Therefore it took great courage for her to decide to open the only bookshop in Hardborough.

Lefebvre pointed out that "space is the place where power can be braved, and where there is space expansion there is anti-space expansion." In popular terms, where there is oppression, there is

resistance. Florence was oppressed, but she chose not to fight back violently, but in a relatively gentle way, quietly tried to keep her bookshop afloat in the hope of saving it. In the social space of the Old House Bookshop, Florence's courage in the face of oppression by bureaucrats and the indifference of small town people is the subject of this book. In response to Milo's questioning of her efforts, Florence retorted: "Surely you have to succeed, if you give everything you have." But under the power of the bureaucrats, and facing the indifference and ridicule of the people of the small town, and coupled with the fact that Christine, her only assistant, went to the Technical School and Mr. Brundish, the only person who helped her, passed away unexpectedly, her efforts were really insignificant. The result of the closure of the bookshop has already been doomed in this complicated social relationship.

5. Mental space

Space theory values both physical space and mental space participation. The main content of literature is to show individual inner world and individual subconscious activities, so mental space has become the object of space theory.^[5] While describing the fixed physical space, the author creates a multi-dimensional and full psychological space. In fact, to some extent, the author's description of physical space serves to successfully shape mental space.^[3] Gaston Bashara put forward in the *Poetics of Space* that "Home is a powerful fusion force that integrates people's thoughts, memories and dreams together." The Old House Bookshop in the book is also a family house. After buying the old house, Florence quickly moved in, even though the old house was in disrepair and the accommodation was very poor. The Old House Bookshop carries her dream. She loved every corner of it and carefully arranged every bookshelf. Even after the rappers in the old house had been quiet for a long time, Florence missed them. The Old House Bookshop, a blend of Florentine ideas and dreams, became a symbol of courage.

Maslow, an American psychologist, based on his understanding of the basic needs of human beings, put forward the "Hierarchy of Needs Theory", which divides the basic needs of human beings into five levels from the bottom up according to a pyramidal structure, namely, Physiological needs, Safety needs, Social needs, Esteem needs, and Self-actualization needs. In *The Bookshop*, Florence succeeds in running a bookshop, which greatly satisfies her highest need for self-actualization. Florence lived a simple life and had no intention of remarrying or having children after her husband's death. She had been alone for many years and her only dream was to open a bookshop with the savings she has accumulated over the years. During the successful opening of the bookshop and its development into a lending library, Florence paid little attention to her physiological needs, safety needs, and needs of belonging and love. Instead, she tried her best to maintain the operation of the bookshop, fulfilling her need of esteem and self-actualization.

6. Conclusion

From the perspective of Lefebvre's space theory, this paper analyzes *The Bookshop* from three aspects: physical space, social space and mental space, trying to help readers have a deeper understanding of this book. It is worth mentioning that the realization process of self-value of the protagonist Florence in the spatial level has been hindered by many aspects and has certain limitations, but her spirit and courage to adhere to her dream are worthy of affirmation, and have a certain incentive effect on young people in the new era.

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