

Spatial Narrative in “The Story of an Hour”

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In a novel, space is an essential element, because the characters need a special place to tell their stories. In recent years, more and more scholars indulge their interest in studying spatial narrative. “The Story of an Hour” is one of Kate Chopin’s representative works, which describes one-hour mental journey of Mrs. Mallard after hearing the death of her husband. This essay will interpret it from the perspective of spatial narrative and try to find its ingenious methods to narrate the story.

Keywords: “The Story of an Hour”, Kate Chopin, spatial narrative

Introduction

“The Story of an Hour” is the best of Kate Chopin’s (1851-1904) short stories. In recent research, most scholars focus on feminism in the novel. Space, however, is one element which is not to be ignored. This paper tries to explore spatial narrative by means of interpreting the story.

In the middle and late 20th century, literary criticism began its “spatial turn”. Space has become the focus of attention of researchers in various disciplines including architecture, geography, literature, philosophy, sociology, etc. “Space is everywhere in modern thought” (Crang & Thrift, 2000).

In American research, the study of space begins earlier. In 1945, Joseph Frank, an American scholar first proposed “spatial form” in “Spatial Form in Modern Literature” (Frank, 1945). In 1978, Seymour Chatman proposed “story-space” and “discourse-space” in “Story and Discourse” (Chatman, 1978). In Chinese research, the study of space began relatively late. Professor Zhang Shijun is the earliest one who used the theory of space in literature (Liu, 2019).

The Natural Space: Room

Space is a structured existence, and people live in space, and all activities and production are carried out in space. The space with this meaning is the place of matter and nature (Mao & Shen, 2010)

“The Story of an Hour” takes place in the house of the Mallards. The space changes from the living room to bedroom, and finally back to the living room. Mrs. Mallard heard the news about her husband’s death in the living room, and then went back to her bedroom, at the end of the novel she returned to the living room and died there. The living room is like a world of hegemony, where the lady’s destiny is decided. She was forced to accept the news of her husband’s death in the living room. Additionally, when she saw that her husband was

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still alive, she died in the living room. On the contrary, the bedroom is like a free world where she can have her own self-consciousness. She is free to meditate in the bedroom, and enjoy the tranquility of life.

In the room, facing the open window, stood a comfortable and spacious armchair in the room. The blue sky outside of the window is piled with clouds. This shows that the room is spacious and bright. The comfortable indoor environment implies her economic and social status. This is the most basic function of natural space (Mao & Shen, 2010). At the end of the novel, Mrs. Mallard “clasped her sister’s waist, and together they descended the stairs”. It implies that their house at least has two floors. Therefore, their pecuniary condition is not bad, and they do not belong to low class.

The “room” in the story is also where Mrs. Mallard lives and gains freedom of thought and action. On the one hand, Mrs. Mallard is the owner of the room. She can think and act freely in this space. On the other hand, a room with windows connects the internal space and the external space, which can help people in the room adjust and think about their emotions. After internal struggles, Mrs. Mallard finally realized that she would be free forever. Therefore, she has a beautiful imagination of her future life.

In short, the room provided a space for the story. But more importantly, it offers some background information about Mrs. Mallard. Therefore, we can analyze the underlying causes of her psychological changes in the light of society.

The Social Space: Door

Space is not just a large container to accommodate people and everything, but also closely related to human activities in space. In Chopin’s novel, traditional women are repressed and abused, but new women show the yearning and pursuit of independent self. Mrs. Mallard, in “The Story of an Hour”, is a combination of both (Hu, 2009)

In “The Story of an Hour”, the closed door in the novel symbolizes the heroine’s closed inner world. The “door” separates her personal space from her family space, because in her family space she was not allowed to express her own thought freely. But in the bedroom, she is a free willed person who can loudly reveal her inner demands.

When Josephine knocked the door, Chopin used a series of direct quotes to show Josephine’s concern. Josephine is a typical traditional woman created by this society. She believed that the death of Mrs. Mallard’s husband would bring great sorrow to Mrs. Mallard without doubt. But Mrs. Mallard’s thought has changed. Therefore, no matter how Josephine knocks on the door, she would not open it, because she didn’t want others to know her true feelings and thoughts. But when she closed the door, she didn’t close the window.

The open window connects the room of Mrs. Mallard with the outer space of the whole house; therefore, it symbolizes the communication between her inner world and the outer world outside of marriage.

On the surface, Mrs. Mallard’s marriage seemed harmonious and happy. On the one hand, Mrs. Mallard admitted that her husband loved her deeply. On the other hand, her relatives and friends took good care of her. In short, Mrs. Mallard’s life is enviable. For a woman who lived at that time, such a marriage life is undoubtedly worth pursuing. However, we can find the twists and turns in the superficial happiness. In the patriarchal society where Mrs. Mallard lived, women’s status is very low. Generally speaking, women are believed to be dependent on men. At the beginning of the story, everyone tries their best to cover up the death

of Mallard husband’s death, which shows that women are men’s “accessories”, and the death of the husband is a huge disaster to any woman.

The Psychological Space: From Sorrow to Happy to Dead

When Mrs. Mallard first heard the bad news, she began to cry. At this time, Kate Chopin presents a weak female character. Later, she felt exhausted and began to meditate. She realizes that “freedom! Body and soul are free!” Obviously, this is Mrs. Mallard’s unconscious desire, because she did not know what the sudden idea was at the beginning, and she tried to resist it with her own will, and this unconscious desire from the heart eventually occupied her body and mind.

Mrs. Mallard fully “suck the nectar of life through the open window”. When She saw the signs of spring out of the window, she began to be energetic and happy, and yearn for freedom.

The psychological change from sadness to yearning for freedom shows that the awakening of Mrs. Mallard’s feminine consciousness. The vivid world outside of her house awake her inner desire. The lively world outside of her house can be seen as an image of Mrs. Mallard’s psychological world. The outside world is like an ideal world where everything is free. Therefore, the better the outside world, the lonelier she is. And she shows the stronger for freedom. But she is weak to break the cage created by society. The house is like a cage for prisoners, which limits her freedom and consciousness, only in her own room, she can meditate freely. Therefore, when she went out of the room, the ideal world collapsed. The return of her husband trapped her in the prison of marriage once again. The illusion of freedom was shattered. There is no hope in her life, and she died in despair. The death of Mrs. Mallard indicated that it’s impossible for women to succeed in their freedom in that era.

Conclusion

From the perspective of spatial narrative theory, the inner and outer space of “The Story of an Hour” shows the different life attitudes of Mrs. Mallard towards the present and future. Chopin, through the presentation of natural space, social space and character’s psychological space, described women’s desire for freedom but their inability and weakness for independence to readers, and portrayed a true picture of women in the low social status in the second half of 19th century.

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