

# Arnold Bennett's Hotel Space and Modernity

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Arnold Bennett is well-known for his regional novels that mainly represent domestic quotidian lives of his pottery town, especially the lower and middle class. However, his infatuation with the hotel space implicates his ambition to re-situate his characters within the parameters of hotel and create new types of characters, representing in new ways the subjectivity of characters and their relations with material space. Based on his hotel writing, this article intends to re-conceive the historical reasons of his obsession with hotel space and further probe the modernity deflected by his representation of domestic selves and modern public identities in hotel space.

*Keywords:* Arnold Bennett, hotel writing, space, modernity

## Introduction

In *The Country and The City*, Raymond Williams (1975) proposes a new type of novel “new border novel” in which some new images such as newspaper and train play a crucial role of promoting social and cultural evolution, which also differentials themselves with regional novels. Actually, the image of hotel also gradually arouses interest of some writers and numerous writers such as Henry James, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Edith Wharton and Thomas Mann who all took “hotels as the background of their stories” (Saloman, 2012, p. 3). There is no exception to Arnold Bennett whose *The Old Wives' Tale*, *The Grand Baby Hotel* and *Imperial Palace* confirm the significance of the hotel in the society as well. “Bennett’s interest in machinery, yachts, hotels, railways and haberdashery, crowds the lesser novels, and appears in one way or another in nearly all of the others” (Wheatley, 1934, p. 181). Hotel is actually a crucial space in modern literary creations as it is embedded with mobility and modernity, just as scholar points out that “the hotel offers itself as the ideal literary setting, enabling authors to bring disparate characters together, and often acting as a microcosm of society as a whole” (Short, 2019, p. 1). Constant going and coming guests entitle the hotel with typical features of mobility. It is clear that “mobility is central to what it is to be modern. A modern citizen is, among other things, a mobile citizen” (Cresswell, 2006, p. 20). In this sense, the hotel, more often than not, is imbued with mobility with all sorts of dwellers from a variety of backgrounds. Compared with static household space, the hotel accordingly displays its peculiar characteristics of mobility and the dynamic, which renders it less likely to establish attachment to certain space, as attachment is closely related with early experience (Bachelard, 1994). The reason why the hotel is so significant is that like home, the hotel exerts great influence on the human being and shapes new identity in modern times. As human being is “constructed and reconstructed by the environments” (Duan, 1977, p. 23), the

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hotel accordingly shapes and constructs a new identity when the individual subjects interact with the space in which they live. In its broad sense, “humans as social beings are said to produce their own life, their own consciousness, their own world. There is nothing, in history or in society, which does not have to be achieved and produced” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 68). In a way, hotel is the media of human being, producing their new lifestyle and patterns of social relations. The hotel is neither a private space like home in which one can have access to the privacy nor public space in which one hardly has any privacy. Probably Homi Bhabha’s interpretation of “in-betweenness” may best interpret this situation. In this sense, hotel is born with the mobility and fluidity. Hotel is a space that is both produced and continually constituted by bodily mobility as it is produced by the movement of people from one place to another. In others words, hotel can be a station on the journey or a destination but not a permanent location for dwelling (Clifford, 1992). Therefore, the fluidity and transience is inherent in the hotel space.

Arnold Bennett’s works repetitively touch upon the motif of the hotel and re-situate his domestic characters in modern hotel, posing a challenge to the traditional household space. The rapid development of transport and communication tools brought the hotel to the foreground and Bennett sensitively seized the opportunity to represent it in his works. It is worth noticing that Bennett attached great importance to the hotel both at the beginning and the end of his writing career, which discloses a worldwide phenomenon that hotel had been an irreplaceable part of the society. He actually delineates dramatic life of the hotel in his masterpiece *The Old Wives’ Tale* but both *The Grand Babylon Hotel* and *Imperial Palace* are directly based on the background of hotel. It can be discerned that probing hotel space can be conducive to better comprehending Bennett’s works.

### **Representation of Mobility of the Hotel Space**

Mobility actually exists in all ages but no period is more strikingly looming than the transitional period from the nineteenth to the twentieth century when the railways and motorcars strengthened the connection between different geographical locations. This period is the “compression of time-space”, one phenomenon of capitalist societies that engage the “speed up the pace of life”, overcoming all the spatial barriers (Harvey, 1990, p. 240). Moving persons and objects produce and strengthen naturally the mobility of the society. Tim Cresswell maintains that the formulation of the time-space compression is “the effective shrinking of the globe by ever-increasing mobility at speed enabled by innovations in transportation and communications technology” (Cresswell, 2006, p. 4). In this sense, hotel turns into an accelerator of compression of time-space, rendering the hotel a modern space full of mobility and modernity.

Arnold Bennett has delineated a small hotel managed by his protagonist Baines Sophia who runs the hotel for three decades in Paris in *The Old Wives’ Tale*. Andrew Sanders deems that Bennett’s works oscillate between “the poles of an insistent provinciality and domesticity and a taste for the exotic and peregrinator” (Sanders, 1994, p. 291). It is indeed true in terms of the protagonist Sophia’s experience in two distinct geographical locations Bursely and Paris. Sophia moves from parochial Bursley to metropolitan Paris where she resides almost for three decades running a hotel, which causes her to feel a sense of displacement. The hotel is merely a temporary physical space that can provide private lodging space for sleeping but she has settled down there for three decades as a home. As a matter fact, she has been accustomed to the mundane lives of running the hotel and limited space. Sophia’s living space in hotel constantly reminds her of the mobile identity as a wanderer who never indeed

possesses a real home. The space of hotel as a contemporary dwelling place for those wanderers is “never a real home” (Sanders, 1994, p. 291). Randi Saloman also states that Bennett usually constrains his characters within the space of a hotel and thus these types of characters represent in new ways, i.e. “individual subjectivity and its relation to material space” (Saloman, 2012, p. 1). He further claims that “modernism has traditionally been defined by its rejection of Victorian notions of the domestic, a breaking away from home and family, and from all the network of connections and loyalties that such material conditions and relationships” (Saloman, 2012, p. 2). Sophia spends three decades in a hotel in which she has to adapt herself to the mobile way of living. The space of hotel in Bennett's fiction suggests a new understanding of domestic relations, and of community and nation. Sophia's way of living in hotel space indeed forms a striking contrast with Constance's quotidian space in Bursley. Sophia's escape is indeed a shock to the stable space of Bursley, which represents a sort of rebellion to conventional values.

Compared with Sophia's hotel, the scale of Babylon hotel is immense and shocking and forms a vast contrast with traditional household space under the influence of consumerism. Although the plot of *The Grand Babylon Hotel* is simple, Bennett presents the internal operational mechanism of the hotel in detail, such as the workplaces in the hotel, including the hall of reception and kitchen. However, despite the fact that the scale of Babylon Hotel is immense and impressive, it is still dwarfed by other neighboring hotels. The narrator delineates that the Grand Babylon, despite its noble proportions, was somewhat “dwarfed by several colossal neighbors. It had but three hundreds and fifty rooms, whereas there are too hotels within a quarter of a mile with six hundred and four hundred rooms” (Bennett, 1902, p. 5). In virtue of numerous rooms in those neighboring hotels, the market of the hotel industry is competitive. The exact number of rooms in these hotels unfolds that the hotel industry is influential, which has spread to all corners of Britain. It is an axiomatic fact that Arnold Bennett also attempts to present a huge and luxurious hotel with countless rooms and different personnel. “The business of the Grand Babylon was enormous. It took Racksole, with all his genius for organization, exactly half an hour to master the details of the hotel laundry-work” (Bennett, 1902, p. 24). The laundry-work was merely one branch of activity amid scores, not to mention a very large one at that. Theodore Racksole, as the new owner of the hotel, finds it complicated to manage the hotel within such a short notice, which unravels the fact that it is intricate to regulate and manage it with a wide range of workers from different countries.

In addition, the Babylon hotel is well-equipped with all necessary infrastructure and different separate rooms for specific functions. For instance, the hotel “consists of six chambers, the anteroom, the saloon or audience chamber, the dining room, the yellow drawing-room, the library, and the state bedroom” (Bennett, 1902, p. 160). It is not difficult to figure out that the hotel is imbued with various detached rooms for specific purposes. Taking into account the decorations of the rooms renders it easy to find out the advanced and fines taste of the hotel. “The decoration of this room is mainly in the German taste, since four out of every six of its Royal occupants are of Teutonic blood, but its chief glory is its French ceiling, a master piece by Fragonard” (Bennett, 1902, p. 160). Those materials employed for decoration come from different countries. The room is decorated in line with German taste and the ceiling is brought from French, which is conformed with the highest standard at that particular period. The narrator further introduces the material of carpet by saying that “the carpet, woven in one piece, is an antique specimen of the finest Turkish work, and it was obtained, a bargain, by Felix Babylon, from an impecunious Roumanian prince” (Bennett, 1902, p. 160). The anecdote of

the source of carpet from Roumanian prince, in some sense, adds mysterious color and image to the hotel. Apart from the fine-woven carpet, the narrator also provides the detailed depiction of some other decorations such as candelabra and vase. The narrator details that “the silver candelabra, now fitted with electric light, came from the Rhine, and each had a separate history. The Royal Chair-it is not etiquette to call it a throne, though it amounts to a throne-was looted by Napoleon from an Austrian city” (Bennett, 1902, p. 161). All these decorations have specific glorious anecdotes, which renders the hotel to be more gloriously continental. Felix Babylon has the nerve to reject a Prince's request to remove it during the Jubilee of 1887 when the hotel had seven persons of Royal members. This anecdote fully corroborates the fact that Babylon Hotel is of unique taste. In addition, the detailed description of wine cellar can also explicitly disclose the grandeur and luxury of the hotel. In the wine cellar there are various brands of wine from different wineries. When Theodore Racksole was ushered into the wine cellar by Felix Babylon, he felt shocked and awed. Upon witnessing these luxurious and expensive wines in their due order, “all the wines of three continents-nay, of four, for the superb and luscious Constantia wine of Cape Colony”, Racksole showed his “bewildered gaze” (Bennett, 1902, p. 190). Undoubtedly, the long list of exotic and foreign brand names of wine further confirms the luxury of Babylon hotel. In some sense, it is understandable that the narrator comments that the hotel never wastes its energy on the humble class. The lowest level of customer is a German prince or the Maharajah of some Indian State, which is the secret of Babylon hotel's triumphant eminence. All the aforementioned evidences explicitly approve the fact that the Babylon hotel is grand and luxurious.

It is worth noting when Arnold Bennett was born, the hotel industry was gradually booming with the advancement of transport and economic development. At the end of the nineteenth century, the hotel was a popular motif that had been probed by numerous writers. When Bennett came of age, he spent a large amount of time living in hotel. Therefore, he was considerably conversant with the inner mechanism of hotel. After the publication of his first novel *A Man from North* in 1896, which did not arouse the attention of critics, he sensitively shifted his attention to the motif of hotel just as his other contemporaries did at that time. Hotel became a heated issue that aroused the attention of numerous writers. It is natural for Bennett to dabble in this topic to cater to the market. Like home, hotel not only provides accommodation but also satisfactory service such as food and entertainment. Emma Short also deems that like the domestic sphere of the nineteenth and early twentieth century Britain, hotel contains “within it multiple types of spaces, rooms that dedicated to any number of uses, from eating, sleeping and conversing, to playing games and dancing” (Short, 2019, p. 177). The hotel space is well-equipped with infrastructure that can meet the demands of all various customers. In a word, the detailed description of luxurious physical space of the hotel actually can disclose the fact that the hotel industry had gained its influence in the society. In other words, the society is heavily influenced by the consumerism and capitalism. The luxurious life in the Babylon hotel has reflected that the society is highly divided into different classes. The influence of consumerism quickly found expressions in the hotel industry due to the rapid development of the nineteenth-century corporate capitalism, with a strong drive for profits and financial gains. Bennett's novels can in a way be comprehended as a critique of the hotel's position at the forefront of the rise in consumerist culture when he detailedly presents the mechanism of capitalism in the hotel.

### **Fashioning Modernity Through *Imperial Palace***

Arnold Bennett's last work *Imperial Palace* is a typical representative that fully displayed a complete operational system and hierarchy of a modern hotel. The detailed description of physical spaces and the layout of the hotel unfold the modernity. The Palace consists of eight floors, each of which is managed by an individual housekeeper. Compared with house management, the management in the hotel is completely different, for it is much more complicated and intricate. The hotel is no more stage or setting for action, but rather an active shaper of a fiction. Andrew Thacker deems that it is essential to reconnect "the representational spaces in literary texts not only to the material space they depict, but also reverse the movement, and understand how social spaces dialogically help fashion the literary forms of texts" (Thacker, 2005, p. 63). The material space of hotel can reveal that how social spaces contribute to the form of literary setting. Even though Virginia Woolf once criticized Bennett's attachment to physical spaces in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs Brown" by saying that he tries to hypnotize us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there" (Woolf, 1924, p. 328), the physical space can indeed reflect the real social situation at that particular period. Specifically, the attachment to the description of hotel space can approve the widespread influence of the hotel industry on the society in fashioning the new identity at the transitional period from the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Emma Short claims that "the initial growth of the hotel industry in Britain was therefore concomitant with the rapid growth in new types of transport-specifically the railway network-in the first half of the nineteenth century, and it is following these developments that the hotel begins to figure frequently as a literary setting" (Short, 2019, p. 23). In this sense, the detailed description of material spaces of the hotel in literary works is conducive to comprehending the social realities. The variety of different spaces within the hotel, including "the lounge, the lobby, the corridors, the back areas, and the bedrooms, construct it as the perfect literary setting, producing as it does a cross-section of society" (Short, 2019, p. 24). The hotel of Imperial Palace, being similar to the structure of society, consists of various kinds of people from nurses and cooks to the housekeepers and general managers. Those servants, housekeepers and waiters have to show their loyalty to the hotel. To some extent, the publication of F.W. Taylor's *The Principle of Scientific Management* (1911) can be a hallmark of the profound transformation, for it heralds a new age featured with scientific management. According to Taylor, "the principal object of management should be to secure the maximum prosperity for the employer, coupled with the maximum prosperity for each employees" (Taylor, 1911, p. 9). The pursuit of maximization of the financial gains is one of typical features of modern capitalist society. The hotel industry is in the realm of capitalism and the hotel management can indeed mirror the running system of the modern company. The head-housekeeper Violet Powler who has to devote herself wholly to the maintenance of the hotel, especially when she is promoted to be the head-housekeeper. The former head-housekeeper Miss Maclaren assigns the tasks to Violet Powler by saying that "see all the taps are right and don't drip. And the locks right everywhere, and everything clean. Bed-linen has to be changed every two days" (Bennett, 1930, p. 154). It is not difficult to figure out that Violet has various obligations to fulfill. In the space of the hotel, she has almost no private time and space to do anything that she really likes. Whatever she does should be conformed with the interest of the hotel. In this sort of running system, employees are turned into the instrument for achieving financial gains and for the sake of the maximization of the labor force.

Compared with the traditional role of housewife in the household space, those housekeepers for one thing work for the payment and the reward and serve the hotel owner for another. In *Imperial Palace*, the narrator minutely describes the structure and scenes of working in the kitchen: “a super-heated world of steel glistening and dull, and bare wood, and food in mass raw and cooked, and bustle, hurrying to and fro, and calling and even raucous shouting in French and Italian: a world of frenzied industry” (Bennett, 1930, p. 73). The detailed description of the space of kitchen presents a clear panorama of life scenes of those working-class employees. The hustle and bustle of the kitchen unfolds that all the employees in the kitchen have their own obligations and duties.

In addition, the hotel can be understood as a symbol of modernity with modern infrastructure to satisfy the needs of dwellers. For instance, the hotel is well-equipped with lights, lifts and other necessary furniture and decorations. The narrator at the beginning of the story describes the well-lighted spaces that “the great-front-hall was well lighted; but the lamps were islands in the vast dusky spaces” (Bennett, 1930, p. 8). He further highlights that “at 2 am. the chandeliers sixteen lamps apiece which hung in the squares of the paneled ceiling creased to shower down their spendthrift electricity on the rugs and the concrete floor impressively patterned in huge lozenges of black and white.... In theory it opened for breakfast at 6 a.m., but in fact it was never closed, nor its kitchen closed” (Bennett, 1930, p. 8). From this excerpt, it takes no pains to discover that the spaces of the hall, reading rooms and kitchen are all lighted day and night, which is different from the household space. The chandelier, floor, ceiling, rugs and glass partitions render the hotel to be more luxurious and radiant. The scene in the hotel actually unfolds a modern commercial landscape. New technologies and architectural designs all bring convenience and comfort to the temporary residents. Like the railway that produces convenience and benefits to the society, hotel, by the same token, provides satisfied services for those dwellers who usually take a short-term stay in the hotel. It is well known that train has accelerated the pace of life and mobility of people and as a matter of fact, it is the same with the hotel, as it also plays the similar function. Like home, hotel can provide dwelling with soft bed and delicious food, while at the same time, unlike home, hotel cannot offer permanent residence. “The hotel constitutes a certain milieu which renders it an apt setting for representations of the modern restless mind” (Charlotte, 2013, p. 71). It is just merely a temporary space for travelers and thus the mobility is inherent in the hotel. Although the hotel is not an ideal space to dwell in, it still fulfills certain significant role in the transitional period. Randi Salomon maintains that the hotels are not “places of isolation, but overwhelmingly—often unexpectedly—positive and productive spaces, emblems of a largely unremarked conception of modern domesticity, and a new understanding of home and personal relations in the modern world” (Saloman, 2012, p. 6). It is true that the inherent mobility provokes a new comprehension to the traditional relations between individual persons and home. As a herald of modernity, the hotel urges modern residents to re-evaluate and speculate on the function of domestic space. The hotel can substitute the domestic space and provide all sorts of service to customers, which actually poses a challenge to the conventional domestic space. The time in which residents are stuck in one single geographical location is gone and hotel together with the new transport such as train makes it possible for those travelers to move from one place to another, especially since the mid of the nineteenth century when the train came into being.

### Destabilizing the Stable Household Space

In terms of relatively stable household space, the hotel is also a symbol of mobility as the hotel itself is a place with more mobility (Walsh, 2015). Those travelers with a variety of social backgrounds come from all corners of the world, staying in the same place for a short time. Bennett's hometown Buslem, as an unknown small place, presents a certain gap with the outside world. However, with the development of the hotel industry, the foreign travelers continue to come and visit the pottery towns, and thus the hotel has become an accelerator for the mobility, accelerating the pace of the Five Towns' integration with the world. Industrialization, urbanization and commercialization are all factors, promoting the residents of the Five Towns to adapt to the new environment. Both *The Grand Babylon Hotel* and *Imperial Palace* are based on the space of hotel, which is distinct from that of the household. If the Five Towns novels indeed represent the conventional and stable household space, then the latter is the symbol of the dynamic space in which people hailing from various locations encounter and thus showcase their peculiar personalities. The shift of writing material unfolds that Bennett attempts to shift his attention from provinciality to cosmopolitanity. Choosing the metropolitan city London as the setting unravels his apparent transformation of themes, because London is the center of the world, whereas Buslem is merely a provincial unknown place. *The Grand Babylon Hotel* only delineates the mundane life of those upper-class and aristocratic customers, while those Five Towns novels mainly focus on the lower and the middle class indigens, which forms a vast contrast and reveals Bennett's attempt of transformation of writing theme.

It is true that like household space, hotel can provide the dwelling and necessary food for those residents. However, one of striking differences between the hotel and the home is that the nature of the hotel is commercial. The supreme aim of the hotel is the financial gains, which forces those employees to constantly work for the enterprise of the hotel. At times, they have to sacrifice their free time and hobbies. For instance, the housekeeper Miss Spencer in *The Grand Babylon Hotel* is always busy with all sorts of tasks such as imparting information, receiving telephones and so on. She cannot entertain herself by visiting theaters and music halls. The narrator delineates that "she seemed to spend the whole of her life in that official lair of hers, imparting information to guests, telephoning to the various departments, or engaged in intimate conversations with her special friends on the staff" (Bennett, 1902, p. 3). The excerpt reveals the fact that Miss Spencer is conversant with the entertaining programs and items but she never has the free time to head for these places and enjoy it by herself. In other words, she can not arrange her time according to her own plan and volition. It is indeed true that the advent of hotel forces people to reevaluate the role of home and personal relations with the home. Obviously, there are great differences between the hotel space and the household space, and accordingly there are also obvious differences in the roles and identities of characters. Bettina Matthias's book on hotels in early twentieth-century Austrian and German literature regards the literary hotel as a place of danger and uncertainty, as well as of opportunity. He claims that "hotel rooms are rented spaces to which we are not the only ones who have a key. They are filled with objects and furniture that an indiscriminate number of people have used and will use, that we neither bought nor chose, placed in a room that says nothing about us" (Matthias, 2006, p. 41). At the same time, some scholar also points out the negative side of hotel by saying that "the interest provoked by the hotel during this period is unprecedented and the hotel constitutes a certain milieu

which renders it an apt setting for representations of the modern restless mind” (Bates, 2013, p. 71). In spite of this, Arnold Bennett’s hotel writing attempts to say something to the effect that with the advent of hotel, the stable household space is challenged and deconstructed. According to Walter Benjamin, “modernity includes a multitude of references to both trains and pedestrians” (Benjamin, 1999, p. 18). The alleged modernity can also have recourse to the hotel. As a new product of the society, the hotel space actually exerts considerable influence on “the whole way of living” (Williams, 1961) of residents.

### Conclusion

Arnold Bennett reevaluates the accepted notion of home and domestic life and re-situates his characters in the realm of the hotel space to probe the relationship between the material space of modern hotel and individual identity. During the transitional period from Victorianism to modernism, Bennett attempted to move his characters from one geographical location to another, discussing where they dwell, how they define and are defined by the space in which they live in. As a crucial modern space fraught with mobility, Bennett contrasts modern hotel space with traditional household space, demonstrating a dynamic relation between living environs and literary creations of modern writers who unfold the restless mind of modern people.

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