

An Interpretation of Female Growth in *The Bloody Chamber* from the Perspective of Spatial Criticism

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Angela Carter's short story, *The Bloody Chamber*, was created by rewriting the fairy tale *Bluebeard*, which expressed her strong feminist views. Based on the theory of spatial criticism, this paper is meant to interpret the growth of the heroine in *The Bloody Chamber*. It analyzes the nameless bride's growth process of searching for her true self in the novel from the three levels: social space, physical space and psychological space.

Keywords: *The Bloody Chamber*, spatial criticism, female growth

Introduction

Angela Carter is one of the most creative and controversial British women writers in the second half of the twentieth century. *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* is her most famous collection of fairy tale adaptations, all based on folk tales and classic fairy tales. In Carter's rewriting of the fairy tale, the female role is no longer a functional character without personality, but a flesh-and-blood new female image shaped by Carter. Contrary to the moral enlightenment significance of the classical fairy tale, Carter injects her own unique feminist thought into the rewriting process, which shatters female stereotypes and solidified thinking in classic fairy tales, portrays a new-age woman with a growing mindset and explores the growth and pathways for women.

Henri Lefebvre, the founder of the theory of space, mentioned that "space is never empty; it is a product of society" in *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 77). Using the method of spatial criticism, this paper divides space into physical, social and psychological aspects, analyzes the growth process of the protagonist and reveals the young nameless bride's metamorphosis from immature to mature. The unfairness of social space leads to the heroine's loss and confusion, while the exploration of physical space and the epiphany of psychological space are the signs of her maturity.

The Shackles of the Nameless Girl in Social Space

In the novel, the power operation is very obvious in the visible and invisible struggle between the hero and heroine, which reveals the fragile living conditions of women in the patriarchal society. The marquis married a girl who was only 17 years old, not out of love, but with money and gorgeous outfits to "buy" this inexperienced and innocent young girl. The marquis thought that he had the right to occupy, control and utilize his wife. In any

society, space is not an empty container with nothing; it must contain some mode and mechanism of power, which might be manifested in fierce struggle or in quiet operation.

In the social space, the young wife was regarded as a beautiful accessory of the wealthy marquis, people's gaze and comments showed that she had become a noblewoman from "Cinderella". In this case, she still had no right to speak in the social public place and even the valuable jewelry and surface pride cannot hide her humble heart. "... The night before, by some strange coincidence, he had taken my mother and me to see Tristan... In his arms, I was the center of attention. In the foyer of the theatre, the whispering crowd parted to let us pass like a red sea" (Carter, 2009, p. 11), when the young wife and the Marquis appeared in the theatre, everyone was staring at the girl and also her wedding present. The beautiful coat reflected her different status that she was no longer the poor little girl, but has transformed into the graceful marquis's new wife. In the public social space such as the theater, a young wife possessed little power and her light was entirely from her husband. At the same time, the social admiration she craved was also based on the domination of space by the men-dominated society.

When the marquis died, the marchioness, to whom he had been married for only one day, inherited all his property. She chose not to live in the castle, but turned it into a school for the blind. What made the outside world more suspicious was that the marquise has just lost her husband but set up a new family with an unknown blind tune. The pressure on her in the social space added to her psychological burden and made it difficult for her to move on. In the final analysis, her words, deeds and thoughts were deeply influenced by the public's gaze in the patriarchal society at that time: the male-dominated society had established certain norms for women, so the young wife measured herself by the so-called social "standards" in all aspects. All of the rules formed in the social space became the young girl's shackles, and under such circumstances, her self-personality was suppressed as well as her self-governing power was weakened.

Power Expansion of the Young Wife in Physical Space

"In a patriarchal society dominated by sexism, the dominant male individual or group always plans and stipulates the gender spatial order according to their own interests and ideas, and maintains and strengthens the sexism and hierarchy through the gender spatial order relations, ultimately serving their own interests" (Massey, 1994, p. 179). The Marquis in the short story was such a man. He placed twelve mirrors in his bedroom to admire woman's body as his private property, and used a variety of torture devices to mistreat his former wives in the secret room. The whole castle is a symbol of his wealth and power. In previous literary criticism, the spatial element of literature is mainly the scene where the plot takes place and the stage where the characters' activities take place. However, in the view of literary spatial criticism, the spatial elements of text are not only scenes and stages, but also have the function of representing characters. In *The Bloody Chamber*, Carter used the physical space to shape an anti-traditional female image.

The Young Wife's Desire in the Bedroom

The bedroom is a very private place for couples, especially newlyweds. Angela Carter directly describes the sexual behavior between men and women in the bedroom space, and more importantly, the heroine opens the door to her desire for sex. In the traditional mindset, sex is often a difficult act to talk about. As women who have been disciplined by the patriarchal society, they are even more afraid to talk and think about sex, while the heroine in *The Bloody Chamber* breaks the traditional female image. First of all, although she was only seventeen,

she was not a traditional teenage girl who knew nothing about sex. When the Marquis asked her to marry him, she looked at him and thought that “Oh! He must want me so much!” This shows that the heroine knew something about the sexual behavior between men and women before the marriage. Secondly, the heroine gradually revealed her own desires in her self-monologue. After the first night, the young wife expressed her desire more directly in her heart, saying “I want him”, and she did not feel ashamed and disgusted at having such an idea. The young wife was a new kind of woman born in this bedroom space, who was not like the Marquis’s three ex-wives brutally killed by the Marquis, and had the right to enjoy sexual desire, rather than being objectified as a plaything of male abuse. Although the heroine in the story only acknowledged and expressed her own desires, it also expressed her doubts about the traditional gender space and strong self-space demands, which was the first step to subvert the traditional male-female relationship and break the antagonism between the sexes.

The Young Wife’s Exploration into the Marquis’s Space

Before the Marquis left the castle for work, he gave his young wife, the heroine of the story, the keys to all the rooms in the castle, including the keys to his office and even the “bloody room”. In patriarchal society, only men had their own study or office in the house, and such private areas were usually off limits to women. But the heroine was different, who followed her heart and bravely stepped into these male “forbidden areas”.

In the process of the young girl’s access to her husband’s physical space, she stood out in the male-dominated society, and satisfied her curiosity by shaking off the shackles of traditional women. The heroine’s stepping into the Marquis’s office means that she was looking for a way to balance the relationship between two sexes. The bloody room seemed to be a place where men ruled and even tortured women, but when the heroine broke into this room without the permission of the Marquis, the stereotype that women were always controlled by men was also broken. At the same time, the young wife’s power of self-governing and self-satisfying expanded during her access to man-dominated physical space.

Growth Epiphany of the Heroine in Psychological Space

Social space, physical space and psychological space are inseparable. The invisible pressure exerted by social space caused the young girl’s loss and confusion, her exploration of power in physical space was the reflection of her inner changes, and the psychological space brought self-awareness and growth epiphany to her.

The heroine’s mother and the mirror effect played a great role in her psychological space. In the short story, there was not much description about the “mother” image, but we could know that the heroine’s mother was “extraordinary”, who killed a tiger when she was only 18. When the young wife found out the crime and true colors of her husband for killing his three ex-wives, she was not afraid and intimidated. Instead, the young girl realized that she had inherited her mother’s courage and willpower to fight outlaws. The young wife calmed down quickly, decided to fight against the monster bravely and escaped from the castle depending on the power from her brave mother in her psychological space.

The mirror mentioned above also helped the young wife awake her self-awareness and rebel against the Marquis. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre argued that “all properties can be defined in terms of a mirror effect, on the basis that whatever is possessed by the ‘self’ becomes the ‘self’ itself” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 154). Obviously, mirrors belong to such objects, and the image produced by the mirror is undoubtedly the most original expression of the mirror effect. In the story, the nameless bride regarded her “true self” as the image

reflected in the eyes of her husband, and gradually lost her subjectivity of the self. The combination of twelve mirrors symbolically implies that the personal experience of the nameless bride is the collective experience of countless women in the society, which deeply reveals the power oppression of women in the patriarchal society. In the end of *The Bloody Chamber*, the young wife finally woke up, got rid of the colored mirror of the marquis, and saw the twelve true selves in the twelve mirrors. Although she was fragile and helpless in the mirror, this is undoubtedly the key witness of her self-awakening. In addition, the monocle on the Marquis's face also fell to the ground, his desire to gaze at the nameless bride finally disappeared, and his abominable act of mutilating his wives came to an end. With the help of her mother, the young girl was finally transformed from a weak object to a subject with self-awareness.

Conclusion

In Angela Carter's *The Bloody Chamber*, the patriarchy represented by the Marquis has an indomitable influence on the life and destiny of the heroine. The social space dominated by the patriarchal society directly or indirectly leads to the extremely limited actual power of women. In this story, the heroine realized self-awakening in the growth process and fought against the marquis through the exploration of the man-dominated physical space and the epiphany in her psychological space. Female images in Carter's works are no longer docile "angels in the house", but new women with their own space demands, which is a great inspiration for female growth in the real world.

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