

Spatial Narrative and Identity Constructions in *As I Lay Dying*

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Abstract: *As I Lay Dying* is a masterpiece by the Southern American writer Faulkner, telling the story of the Bundren family's journey to the town of Jefferson to bury Mistress Addie. Upon its publication, the novel attracted scholarly attention. The novel's characterisation, religious themes and artistic techniques all constitute hotspots of scholarly attention. In contrast, the academia has not paid enough attention to the social factors behind the novel, and the research is not deep enough. In the author's view, *My Time to Die* not only reproduces the poor life of farmers, but also touches on the game and identity construction between the urban and rural spaces in the American South. In the process of trying to integrate into the town space, the pressures and restrictions experienced by the Bundren family reflect the structural domination of the town over the countryside. The shift of multiple perspectives even breaks the coherence of the narrative, presenting the Bundren family as a fragmented and conflicted underprivileged group, and demonstrating the existential dilemma of rural people in the process of urbanisation. With the in-depth study of narrative space, Long Diyong's theory of spatial narrative provides a new perspective for interpreting *As I Lay Dying*. Based on this theory, interpreting the spatial elements in the novel in terms of story space, formal space and psychological space can analyze the fate of the characters in greater depth, analyze the character traits, and allow readers to feel the author's writing charm.

Keywords: Spatial Narrative; Identity Construction; *As I Lay Dying*.

1. Introduction

Since Henri Lefebvre published *The Production of Space* in 1974, as another important dimension of novel narrative, space has become the focus of researchers. According to the contemporary space narrative theory, space includes not only the visible space in the category of geography, but also "the symbolic representation space produced by means of representation, presentation, imagination, fiction, metaphor, symbol and some others". Space is the place where human beings exist, live and interact with it. Individual and group behaviors can only be carried out in a specific space, which can be said to be the specific place where our actions and consciousness occur. On the contrary, space must also be used and perceived by people, appear in people's consciousness, carry emotional elements, enter the spiritual field, and become a living space. Therefore, space is physical, spiritual and social.

The modernist writers of the 20th century were good at breaking the chronological order of the novels, and even better at using spatial structure to arrange events and construct plots. Among them, Joseph Frank's spatial theory had a great influence on the modern novels. With the in-depth study of narrative and space, Long Diyong's spatial narratology came into being, providing a new perspective for interpreting the novel's content, form, and characters. This paper will take the relevant theories of Long Diyong's spatial narratology as a guide to explore the spatial narrative in William Faulkner's novel *As I Lay Dying* (1930), starting from the story space, formal space, and psychological space.

As I Lay Dying is a novel by American author William Faulkner (1897-1962), the plot of which centers on the death of the heroine, Addie Bundren, and the journey of her body as it is transported by her family to the town of Jefferson for burial. The plot of the novel centers around the death of the heroine Addie Bundren and her family's journey to

Jeffersontown for burial. Since its publication, the novel has had a profound impact. Harold Bloom (2011: 265-267) has called it "the finest opening of the twentieth-century American novel" and "a masterpiece of thoughtful craftsmanship." Faulkner himself regarded the novel as his favorite, and publicly expressed his affection for it on several occasions: in 1931, he told a visiting journalist that it was "his best novel" (Meriwether & Millgate, 1968: 8), and in 1947, during an interview at the University of Mississippi, Faulkner told the audience that it was "his best novel" (Meriwether & Millgate, 1968: 8). In an interview at the University of Mississippi in 1947, Faulkner recommended the novel to students as "easier to read and most interesting" (Shominhan, 1997: 275). Scholars have explored the novel's themes from a number of perspectives: some have probed the deeper meaning of the journey, interpreting it as a "primitive fable about man's capacity for endurance" (Millgate, 1978: 110) and a "collective Don Quixotean farce of adventure" (Lan Renzhe, 2015: 7); others have focused on the novel's feminine tendencies, exploring "the impact of the absence of maternal love on the family" (Williams, 1977: 97), or viewing the novel's development as "an Eddie-centered or see the development of the novel as 'a swirling process of expansion centered on Addie' (Bao, Zhongming and Zhang, Hao, 2009: 77), and read Addie as 'a positive force against negative patriarchal philosophies'" (Hewson, 2000: 551).

In analyzing the characters' behaviors and thoughts, the above studies are basically "on the facts" and do not explain the spaces laid out in the novel and the differences in identities embodied in the spaces, which are at the core of the novel's interpretation. In fact, this journey reflects the exploitation of capitalist space and the penetration of consumer culture. The Bundren family's departure and return are inseparable from the word "identity", and their story demonstrates the delicate relationship between urban and rural areas, which is both competitive and constraining, as "the Bundren family

demands to be part of the middle class, but is rejected and suppressed by the middle class” (Lester, 2005: 31).

2. Story Space: Yorknapatawpha County

Long Diyong defines story space in Spatial Narratology: “The so-called story space is the kind of ‘physical space’ (such as an old house, a busy street, a gothic castle, etc.) mentioned in the narrative work, which is actually the place or location where the event takes place.” Story space is the place where the story takes place, the indispensable scene in the narrative, and the physical space in the narrative text. In modern novels, the element of space has an important narrative function, it is not only the place where the event happens, but also can enrich the connotation of the story, and plays multiple roles in the story, such as highlighting the theme, reflecting the characters, organizing the plot, and supporting the extension of the story.

The story space of *As I Lay Dying* is Yorknapatawpha County, the rural southern United States where the Bendren family lives, and the town of Jefferson, its burial destination. The novel follows the Bundren family as they embark on a journey that shifts the story space from York Napatawpha County to Jefferson Township, 40 miles away, in order to follow Addie’s last wish of burying her in her mother’s home, Jefferson Township. The fate of the Bendren family changes dramatically during the shift in story space. In the novel, in addition to the two large story spaces of Yorknapatawpha County, where the Bendrens live, and Jefferson Township, the destination of the burial, the author expands upon specific story spaces, which include the shop of Samson, a country neighbour, where the Bendrens have borrowed a place to stay on their journey, the bridge and river that lead to Mortenson Township, the drugstore in Mortenson Township, and the barn of Gillespie, a country neighbour, where the Bendrens have borrowed a place to stay. These specific spaces are constantly transformed to show the survival of farmers in the American South, foreshadowing the characters’ difficult fates and driving the narrative.

In Yorknapatawpha County, where the Bendrens lived, Addie was dying and her children, Darl and Jewel, were out catching a bus for the cost of the funeral. Three days after Addie’s death, they arrived at Samson’s shop, where Samson advised them to take a detour through the town of Mortenson. On the fourth day of Eddie’s death, they encounter the bridge and the river leading to Mottson, which the author describes with the adjective “flimsy”, making it seem as if the bridge would collapse in an instant, and the river rises swiftly, foreshadowing the Bundren family’s ordeal. In this space, Eddie’s coffin is swept away by the water and Cash breaks his leg. On the eighth day of Eddie’s death, in the town of Mortensen, Dewey Dell’s abortion is denied and Cash breaks his leg in cement. On the ninth day of Eddie’s death, Bundren borrows the barn of his country neighbour Gillespie, located on the outskirts of Jefferson Township, and Dahl goes crazy and sets fire to Eddie’s coffin. On the tenth day of Eddie’s death, they arrive at their destination, Jeffersontown, while Darl has been committed to an insane asylum, Dewey Dell has had a botched abortion, and Cash’s leg is necrotic. During the transition from one space to another, the Bundren family suffers many trials and tribulations, and the fate of its characters is dramatically transformed. It can be seen that the development of the storyline are closely related to the

transformation of space, while the transformation of space is also related to the change of the fate of the characters.

Long Diyong believes that writing a special space in a narrative work can well characterise the character traits of the characters. Therefore, he proposed the “spatial representation method”, that is to say, “writing a specific space in a narrative work and making it a figurative and concrete representation of the character is a new method of characterisation”. Although there are many spatial transformations in the novel *As I Lay Dying*, not all of the spatial descriptions have the effect of reflecting the characters’ character. In this case, Long Diyong thinks that the “outer space” is not enough to express the character and portray the character, so he creates some small spaces for personalised description. For example, Darl, the second son of the Bundren family, describes a small space, the stable, in the second stanza of the novel, in which the text recounts Jewel’s behaviour of walking into the stable, feeding the horse and treating it roughly. “The horse walked into the stable and Jewel followed. The horse kicked at him without even looking back, one hoof stomping against the wall with a shooting sound. Jewel kicked him in the stomach; the horse grimaced and whipped his head round, and Jewel swung his fist at his face, mounted the manger in his momentum, and stood on it. He climbed the trellis where the hay was kept and lowered his head toward the top of the stable and the doorway.” Objects such as the stable, the manger, the trellis, the stable roof, etc., by themselves give a sense of space, and these objects as a whole make up a small space. In the small space of the stable, the author conveys Jewel’s grumpy and rude character to the reader.

In a word, the story space carries the role of advancing the development of the story, foreshadowing the twist of fate of the characters, and is also the symbol of the connotation of the novel. At the same time, the spatial representation method reflects a certain emotion and psychological state of the characters through spatial writing, which becomes an important means of highlighting the character and shaping the character image.

3. A Jigsaw Puzzle-like Formal Space.

As a temporal medium, the novel text organised its story according to the linear law of cause and effect before the 20th century, but after the 20th century, different spatial forms were created due to the novelist’s ability to perceive time and space differently. According to Long Diyong’s definition of formal space, “the overall structural arrangement of a narrative work (equivalent to ‘composition’ in painting) is presented as some kind of spatial form (Chinese nesting boxes, circles, chains, etc.). This is a non-linear structural pattern, and the traditional novel structured in a causal linear pattern is indifferent to formal space.” In *As I Lay Dying*, Faulkner uses the creative technique of juxtaposition of multiple perspectives to make the novel spatially reveal a complex formal space. According to Long Diyong, “A novel in jigsaw space, such works are like individual originals that can be reorganised by the reader in accordance with the order, but no matter how one goes about it, there is one thing that must not be forgotten: only by playing a jigsaw game style of piecing together the relevant contents in order to assemble some kind of spatial schema can one find out the wonders of the novel.”

In *As I Lay Dying*, when the narrative is pieced together and assembled through the perspectives of different narrators, it gives the text a jigsaw puzzle-like formal space. Eddie is the center of the novel’s narrative, and his deathbed triggers

the narratives of the other characters. Throughout the novel, there is only one section of Addie's internal monologue, in whose perspective Addie recounts her tragic life. Addie recounts how she meets and marries Anse, but soon realizes that Anse only uses her as a tool for procreation and does not love her, thus Addie does not want to have any physical contact with Anse, believing him to be dead. Afterwards, she meets Reverend Whitfield and has a special relationship with him, but it doesn't end well either and she is eventually abandoned by him. In Eddie's self-narrative, readers can learn about Eddie's unfortunate life, but the narration from Eddie's personal point of view alone does not make the story complete, and it needs to be supplemented with relevant events from the perspective of other characters, such as Doctor Peabody, her husband, Anse, and her lover, Whitfield. Doctor Peabody complements the loveless marriage between Eddie and Anse from his narrative point of view. It is only when Eddie is about to die that Anse takes the initiative to send for him, having not previously been willing to spend money on Eddie's treatment, and Peabody believes that Anse's torment of Eddie has finally come to an end. With an objective perspective, Peabody proves that the marriage between Anse and Eddie is loveless. In Anse's perspective, he has always believed that Eddie is in good health, and as a result, Eddie has become very ill. Anse's perspective not only adds to the fact that his marriage with Edith is loveless, but it also presents him as a selfish character. In Whitfield's perspective, he had planned to confess his secret to Anse, but when he arrives at the door of the Bendrens' neighbor, Tal, and learns that Eddie has died and has not told Anse about their relationship, he changes his previous thoughts and is even very glad that he did not confess his secret. Addie's tragic life is told through the perspectives of different narrators, bringing the novel's fragmented plot to full fruition.

In addition to the formal space of the jigsaw puzzle, which breaks up the plot of the novel and requires readers to assemble it on their own through reading, the complete character traits of several sons of the Bendren family (including Cash, Darl, Waldman, and Jewel) are also presented in the text through the collage and combination of different perspectives of the characters. Cash, the eldest son of the Bundrens and an excellent carpenter, is also presented through a collage of different characters' perspectives. For example, in the perspective of Jewel, the illegitimate son, Cash is always hammering and sawing to make Eddie's coffin. In the perspective of Tal, a neighbor of the Bundrens, Cash has been working night and day to get Eddie's coffin made, showing his love for his mother. In the perspective of his brother, Darl, Cash has been suffering in silence from the pain after breaking his leg. In the perspective of Dr. Peabody, Cash's leg has been left without medical attention and a layer of cement has been put on it, thus showing Cash's strong personality. Whereas in Cash's personal perspective, he ridiculously envisions 13 plans for making a coffin, overemphasizing balance and revealing Cash's dull and mute personality. Therefore, with the combination of different perspectives, the reader can know the complete character traits of Cash.

Overall, in this novel, different narrators complement each other's narratives to build a complete storyline and a complete characterization as well as portrayal of the members of the Bendren family. Each part of the narrative reflects only a certain aspect of the characters and events, and in order to obtain the complete storyline and characterization, the content

narrated by all the characters needs to be combined and pieced together, thus creating a jigsaw puzzle-like formal space.

4. Mental Space: The Sense of Southern Tradition

Many modern authors create literary works by conceptualizing spatial scenes in their minds and later go on to construct character events. The spatial scenes of literary works are often places where the authors have lived with deep memories. The real space, with the help of the author's memory, triggers the author's creative motives and becomes his source of inspiration. According to Long Diyong, "Mental space is a certain spatial characteristic of the writer's mental activities (such as memory, imagination, etc.) when he creates a narrative work." Authors are very sensitive to the relationship between space, past and memory, and they will always return to their "hometown" intentionally or unintentionally in order to recall the past. To a certain extent, the psychological space of the authors is similar to the psychology of the characters in the novels, therefore, the authors also convey their own psychology when they narrate their works. When readers read the novel, they can find that the story space is fictionalized based on the places where the author has lived in his childhood. Faulkner was born in Mississippi, the southern part of the United States, and had an unbreakable emotion for the place where he grew up. He spent many years of his life and creative time in his hometown in Mississippi. He has repeatedly stated in public that he is not a man of letters but a farmer, and has always referred to himself as a "countryman", and transferred this mentality to the creation of his literary works. His sense of southern tradition has always played an important role in the creation of his novels. The Bundrens epitomize the rural farmers of the American South in *As I Lay Dying*. In the text, Faulkner portrays to the reader the selfish and miserly and the kind and innocent southern farmers. Anse is the head of the family, but he is also the representative of the selfish and self-serving countryman. As Eddie is dying, all he can think about is that he can now get dentures, and when his son Cash breaks his leg, he doesn't bother to spend money on medical treatment, and even takes his daughter Dewey Dell's money for an abortion without asking for a reason. But Faulkner also portrays many kind and warm-hearted Southern country people of high moral character in the novel, such as the country neighbors and the doctor. When Eddie dies, the country neighbor, Tal, offers to help with the affairs, and when the river keeps rising as the Bundren family transports Eddie's remains across the river, Tal once again lends a hand to help them cross the river. In addition, Bundren was helped by other neighbors who provided food and lodging during the journey. For example, when it was dark, Samson, a country neighbor shopkeeper, kindly invited the Bundren family to stay at his place and let the Bundrens go to his place for dinner. "I told them to drive the big wagon into the barn, for it was looking like rain again, and supper was almost ready. But they wouldn't come inside to eat." (Faulkner, 71) The Bundrens also stayed overnight at the home of their country neighbor, Amstee, who offered to refill the Bundrens' whiskey and also advised them on where they could get good livestock. In addition, Dr. Peabody overcame many difficulties to come to Bundren's home to see Eddie, and recounted, "Seventy-something years old, weighing more than two hundred pounds, and letting people pull me up on a rope and hang me

down. I don't know how far I would have been swept away if I had given the wind.” (Faulkner, 26) Moseley, a doctor in the town of Mortensen, learns that Dewey Dell is unmarried and pregnant, and is adamant that he will not sell her abortifacients and advises her to hurry home and tell her father to arrange the wedding, “You go back to Leif’s, and you and he will use the ten dollars to make the wedding” (Faulkner, 124). All of these characters embody the image of helpfulness and high moral character of the rural people of the American South, the nostalgia of the author of the novel for the place where he lived in his childhood, for the Old South of the United States, as well as the psychological space of the author.

5. Conclusion

The high artistic achievement of *As I Lay Dying* is largely due to Faulkner’s extensive use of spatial elements in the narrative. In terms of the content of the work, the author builds the storyline and narrative process through the story space, and depicts the great changes in the fate of the Bundren family. At the same time, the author builds the characters’ character through the psychological space, shows the author's unique psychological space, and perceives the psychological characteristics of the characters. In the form of the work, the author is even more ingenious, adopting a jigsaw form space, through the character perspective collage combination and multiple perspectives juxtaposition, to build a complete event as well as a complete character, to improve the reader’s participation, and unconsciously let the readers enter into the heart of the characters of the novel, and produce emotional resonance.

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