

A Study on Symbolic Narrative and Spatial Poetics in Modernist Drama

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Abstract: Modernist drama, as an important transformative force in 20th-century dramatic art, has a unique artistic expression system composed of symbolic narrative and spatial poetics. Symbolic narrative breaks through the logic of reality through metaphor, suggestion and other techniques, and constructs a symbolic network of the spiritual world. Spatial poetics reconstructs time and space through the stage, achieving a leap from physical space to the spiritual dimension. The two interpenetrate each other in the dramatic text and jointly complete the philosophical inquiry into the human existence and circumstances. This article discusses from three dimensions: the symbolic system of symbolic narrative, the ontological construction of spatial poetics and its interactive relationship, revealing how modernist drama responds to the spiritual crisis of The Times through the innovation of artistic forms and providing theoretical references for contemporary drama creation.

Keywords: Modernist Drama; Symbolic Narrative; Spatial Poetics; Spiritual Dimension; Artistic Innovation

1. Introduction

The two world Wars at the beginning of the 20th century not only brought about unprecedented material destruction in human history, but also triggered deep-seated spiritual crises. The demise of faith in traditional religions, the breakdown of moral structures, and the impotence of scientific rationality have left mankind faced with the challenge of existentialism. This shared concern led philosophers to begin thinking anew about the nature and meaning of human existence. Thus, "Thus Spoke Zarathustra" announced: "God is dead," utterly denying the absolute supremacy of traditional religions over the human soul, thus insisting that people must, through self-transcendence, come to realize the value of

their own life [1]. Husserl's phenomenology sought to reclaim the "living world" through the "Bracketing" of the objective world, seeking through "intuitive perceptions" the essence of things [2]. Heidegger further questioned "the meaning of being" with the thesis that "human beings" were "thrown into" the world, that "the essence of their being consists in the choice of 'living towards death'" [3]. "Bashla's" "Spatial Poetics" describes, with "microscopic" depth, the ways in which space determines the human spiritual world. His "Poetic of Space" asserts that "prototype" spaces, "homes" and "nests" embody shared human memory, as well as human projections [4]. Such philosophical movements, together, form the ideological backdrop for the modernist drama, giving theoretical justification for its breach with traditional mode of storytelling, its pursuit into the human spiritual realm. "The Times" spiritual crisis gives rise to the esthetic revolution of modernist drama. "The Times" realistic drama focuses on the representation of the objective world, with importance given to plot coherence and typicality of the personalities of the characters. However, with the effects of war trauma and existential panic, this model has become irrelevant. "The Times" symbolic drama began changes, led by the works of Maeterlinck, where the application of symbolic methodology was promoted, aiming at unearthing the spiritual truth lurking behind events [5]. His literary work "The Bluebird" takes the "bluebird" as its symbolic form of happiness, showing in its plot, through the fanciful experience of two children, mankind's perpetual aspiration for spiritual endeavors. Expressionist drama further breaks down reality. Take, for example, Stringberg's "The Sonata of the Ghost" [6]. In this drama, through distorted stage pictures, along with broken-up story structures, the moral decadence as well as the alienation of human nature within a capitalistic setup were unveiled. Surrealist drama, influenced by Freud's psychoanalytic theory, pursues the direct presentation of the

subconscious and dreams. For instance, Apollinaire's "Tiresia's Breasts" challenges traditional gender concepts through the absurd plot of gender transformation [7]. The Absurdist drama is represented by Beckett's "Waiting for Godot", which reveals the absurdity and sense of nothingness of human existence through circular narratives and meaningless dialogs [8]. Although these schools have different forms of expression, they all point to the subversion of traditional dramatic esthetics - from "imitating nature" to "creating meaning", and from "reproducing reality" to "presenting existence".

2. Symbolic Narrative: The Symbolic Construction of the Spiritual World

2.1 The Philosophical Foundation and Artistic Function of Symbolism

The philosophical foundation of symbolic drama can be traced back to the symbolic movement at the end of the 19th century. In his "Manifesto of Symbolism", Moreas explicitly stated that art should go beyond the direct depiction of the objective world and reveal "a higher level of truth" through symbolic techniques. This kind of "truth" is not an abstract concept that can be grasped by reason, but a spiritual experience perceived through intuition [9]. Baudelaire's poetic practice provided an example for symbolic narrative in drama. His "Flower of Evil" uses images such as "rotting corpses" and "night" to symbolize the spiritual decline of modern society, and at the same time establishes the connection between the sensory world and the spiritual world through "correspondence theory". In drama, the symbolic method carries a dual task: on the one hand, it overcomes the limitations of linguistic reasoning, enabling abstract thoughts to be explicitly expressed. On the other hand, it establishes a polysemantic field of interpretation, enabling the audience to participate, along with their own experiences, in the process of meaning production. In "The Bluebird" by Maeterlinck, [10], "light" is a symbol of truth, as well as the human quest for enlightenment. "The scent of the night" represents fear of the unknown. By incorporating the experiences of smell and vision, it enhances the subjective experiences of the audience. This symbolic language helps drama move beyond moral didactics, approaching a philosophical experiment on the profundity of the human soul.

2.2 The Grammatical System of Symbolic Narrative

The symbolic narrative of modernist drama forms a unique discourse system: First, the metaphorical nature of images. In Strindberg's "The Ghost Sonata", the dining table symbolizes the arena of moral judgment, and the monolog of the old general constitutes an accusation against the hypocrisy of human nature. Secondly, the symbolic nature of the structure. Beckett's "Waiting for Godot" implies the absurdity of human existence through a circular narrative, and the waiting behavior of the two homeless people becomes a microcosm of the predicament of existence. Thirdly, the poetic features of language. Tian Han's "The Sound of the Ancient Pool" constructs a philosophical narrative about the decline and awakening of life through the repeated lamentation of the image of "ancient pool". This symbolic system breaks through the logical chain of traditional drama and forms a polysemous interpretive space.

2.3 The Aesthetic Effect of Symbolic Narrative

Symbolic narrative creates aesthetic distance and interpretive tension through the dislocation of the "signifier" and the "signified". In the process of decoding symbols, the audience undergoes a cognitive leap from concrete perception to abstract speculation. "The alienation effect" thus compels the audience to move away from their natural, resonate-and-response propensity, so as to evaluate existential propositions in a rational manner. However, alongside the openness of symbols, dramatic texts acquire perpetual contemporaneity, allowing audiences of different periods in time to discern fresh notions within the same symbolic framework, thereby constantly infusing timeless masterpieces with life.

3. Spatial Poetics: The Spiritual Dimension of Stage Reconstruction

3.1 Philosophical Origin of Space Theory

"Spatial Poetics" has its theoretical roots in the rich "spatial turn" in philosophy, which emerged as a landmark in the field of philosophy in the 20th century. Husserl introduced the idea of "the Living World", which shattered the conventional mold of the subject-object divide.

Space now ceased to be merely the objective dimension that encased physical reality, but emerged as a dynamic space that strongly associated with human perceptions. Heidegger's "poetic dwelling" further clarified the spiritual property of space. According to him, human existence did not merely occupy space but imposed meaning through its interaction with space. Space thus became a constitutive feature of human existence. Bashla's "Spatial Poetics" explains this thing with the minutest details, which asserts that Prototype spaces such as "home" or "nest" are characterized with the "collective unconscious" of human beings. They contain the essence of human's feeding their "emotions, memories, imaginations", so as to form "the spiritual world" of human beings. Naturally, this theoretical philosophy laid down a strong scientific background in dramatic space, which gave the stage not merely a passive space for storytelling, but a space that takes dynamic roles in meaning production, thus opening a new dimension in dramatic expressions.

3.2 Poetic Reconstruction of Stage Space

Modernist drama promotes spatial poetics with distinctive, innovative ways. Firstly, the symbolic meaning of space. Appiah's stage design theory is extremely pioneering. He proposed that elements such as light, color, and lines shall be used in creating a 'psychological space'. Where, in the design of "Tristan & Isolde", the sloped platforms defy the traditional impression of harmony, but the vertical screen gives a sense of grandeur. However, both work well together, giving the impression of the intricate, intense passion within the hearts of the characters of the drama, so that the viewers would easily experience the spiritual implication indicated within the drama. Secondly, deconstruction of space-time. "Six Roles in Search of Playwrights" by Pirandlou is truly bold, shattering traditions, eliminating any distinction between the 'stage' and 'behind the stage', 'fiction' and 'reality', thus establishing a 'play within a play' system. Such innovative presentation of space-time helps wash away any distinction between reality and illusion, thus giving the audience a deep moment of profundity for introspection on the 'essence of drama' as well as the 'real reality' of the world. Thirdly, realization of audience's spatial involvement. Environmental drama theories strongly recommend the 'breakdown of the

fourth wall,' thus rendering the audience co-conspirers within the 'spatial drama'. Example would be "Diussian in 1969" stage design, where the seating area of the audience turns into 'place of sacrifice'. "The audience ceases being mere spectators, finding itself within the space of the drama.' Such immersion of the audience within the space helps them 'really' experience 'spiritual force' communicated within the drama.

3.3 The Spiritual Dimension of Spatial Poetics

The poetic reconstruction of stage space is, in essence, an externalization of the spiritual aspect. Brecht's "alienation effect" shatters the illusion of space formed through traditional drama, allowing the audience to move beyond immersion in the drama, thus initiating them into a process of rational reflection, enabling them to examine the social issues as well as the existence conditions of human beings reflected in drama through the lens of critical assessment. Aalto's "theory of cruel drama" advocates awakening the collective subconscious of mankind through "primitive" and "violent" forms of space, exciting the dormant emotions and instincts lurking within, enabling the audience to reappraise their own selves as well as the world through the shock of self-discovery. Grotowski's "Poverty Drama" takes the contrary path, eliminating all kinds of decorations and external forms, focusing attention on the essential existence condition of mankind through the naked stage, enabling the audiences to come face-to-face with the most basic spiritual requirements of mankind through the pure space experience. Each one of them, thus, tends toward a thesis statement: the space in drama must become the ground for spiritual experiences, initiating the audiences into self-elevation through exclusive space experiences, leading toward the purification of the soul as well as the evolution of the spiritual within.

4. Symbolizing the Intertextuality between Narrative and Spatial Poetics

4.1 Spatial Presentation of the Symbol System

The coupling of symbolic storytelling and spatial poetic elements is realized through the spatial arrangement of symbolic elements. In

"Inside" by Maetlinck, the symbolic "closed room" represents the "cage of human spirit" in that the constant reference to the scenery outside the window represents a call for "freedom" through metaphor. In Beckett's "Klapp's Last Tape" production, the cluttered stage space represents the material carrier of memory, with the protagonist's monolog establishing an intertextual relationship with the objects in the space. Thus, this configuration imputes spatiality on the symbolic elements, allowing for greater immersion within the symbolic storytelling.

4.2 Symbolic Expression of Spatial Narrative

Spatial poetics can further be extensively developed on the level of symbolic narratives. In "The Long Night and the Long Road" by Eugene O'Neill, the staircase, as a vertical symbolic space, not only represents the difference in family position, but also represents estrangement or estranged relationships. In Cao Yu's "Beijing People", the broken scenery of Zeng's family compound establishes a symbolic analogy with their fate, whereby space is the spiritual language for deciphering social changes. Such treatments show that spatial storytelling is able to surpass its limitations through symbolic methods, moving into the realm of philosophical speculations.

4.3 Aesthetic Innovation of the Integration of the Two

This intertextuality of symbolic narratives and spatial poetic principles brings forth a fresh paradigm of dramatic aesthetics. In Robert Wilson's "Einstein on the Beach", there is a minimalist stage with abstract symbols, constituting a visual poem. By the fusion of spatial rhythm with symbolic images, there is a cross-boundary transition from drama to installation art. Peter Brook's "Empty Space" thesis asserts that "any space can be a stage", which, in essence, represents the supreme form of the fusion of symbolic narratives with spatial poetic principles, whereby the symbolic use of space becomes unlimited if space ceases to have any fixed purpose.

5. Contemporary Implications of Modernist Drama

5.1 Reconstruction of the Ontology of Drama

The symbolic narrative and spatial poetics of

modernist drama broke down the dual opposition between 'literary quality' and 'theatrical quality', demonstrating that the essence of the value of the dramatic arts consists in creating a unique aesthetic experience. This is neither a language art nor a visual display, but forms a multi-dimensional meaning web through the intersection of the symbolic system with spatial storytelling. There is a methodological implication here for the production of drama today, that artists must move beyond the divide of media, explore possibilities of this kind in comprehensive art.

5.2 Responses to the Spirit of the Times

In the globalization and digitalization world, man is faced with the emergence of new forms of existential crises. These crises include the degradation of real relationships through virtual spaces, as well as the resulting compression of humanistic spirit through technological rationale. There is complexity in the spiritual world, as shown in modernist drama, through symbolic storytelling, which rebuilds the interaction between human beings and the world with spatial poeticization. Such inquiry possesses enlightenment value in regard to contemporary art. Taking, for example, the symbolic form of environmental emergency in environmental drama, as well as digital existence in immersive drama, this can be seen as the continuation of the modernist spirit.

5.3 A Bridge for Cross-Cultural Dialogue

The symbolic system and spatial idea of modernist drama possess cross-cultural universality. Virtual performance in Chinese opera and borrowing scenery in gardens possess a profound identity with the spatial poetic idea of Western modern drama. Yugen aesthetics in Japanese Noh plays, Taste Theory in Sanskrit Indian drama, or other such dramatic devices may equally hold a dialogue with symbolic narratives. Such cross-cultural dialogue may not only diversify the mode of expression in dramatic art, but also offer different views for finding solutions to the spiritual dilemma confronting mankind.

6. Conclusion

The symbolic narrative and spatial poetics of modernist drama can be considered a remarkable achievement in the art revolution of the 20th century. Its significance lies not only in

innovation, but also in addressing humanity's timeless question of "what does existence mean" through the revitalization of language. Looking back on this heritage in the modern day is not only addressing the rationale of the evolution of dramatic art, but also assures the poetic habitation of humanity's spiritual world within a technological rationale-dominated environment. Indeed, as the stage of drama retains its position as the "imagined community," researching symbolic narratives, as well as spatial poetic principles, will always retain its importance.

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