

# The Analysis of Hemingway's Short Novel from the Perspective of Spatial Narrative Theory

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**Abstract:** To know Hemingway, his short stories are a means to an entrance to his heart. The ex-soldier in "Soldier's Home" and the hitmen in "The Killers" offer insights to his life experience. Although Hemingway's short stories have been attached a relatively extensive attention, the author of this thesis still conducts a further study from a new perspective of space narratology which is used to analyze the narrative techniques and writing characteristics in order to get an insight into the disjointed narration, presenting Hemingway's excellent spatial narrative techniques and enrich its research angles.

**Keywords:** Spatial Narrative; Hemingway; "Soldier's Home"; "The Killers"

## 1. Introduction

Ernest Hemingway, one of the well-celebrated American novelists, is a remarkable stylist and the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954. His mastery of the art of narrative has exerted far-reaching influence on contemporary style. With keen insight, unique narrative technique and amazing iceberg principle, Hemingway becomes the leading figure in American literary history. In the same era, the aversion of the First World War reflects in literature, young intellectuals feel confused and disappointed about American society. Alienation, unstable mores like drinking, bulling and self-abandonment fill in their works, this group of well-known American authors is termed "Lost Generation". As one of the most indispensable parts of the "Lost Generation", Hemingway not only suffers from both physical and mental injuries caused in the battlefield, he is also afflicted with a lingering traumatic memory by witnessing slaughter and death scenes in the war.

Being on a par with his novels and novelettes, Hemingway's short stories have aroused people's wide concern in the circle of literature and he has been regarded as the master of the art of short story in the western world. "Soldier's Home", "The Killers" etc. are all famous masterpieces. Hemingway's short stories have been widely studied by Chinese and foreign scholars, mostly from the perspective of "code hero," language style and iceberg principle. This thesis takes "Soldier's Home" and "The Killers" as examples, and analyzes the role of space in Hemingway's works.

## 2. Spatial Narrative Theory

"Time and Space are fundamental forms of human existence, and they constitute an inseparable unified whole. To conceive one without another is utterly beyond imagination."<sup>[10]</sup> Albert Einstein indicates that time and space are parallel with each other and should be given the equal status. It's now generally accepted that space is not only a non-dynamic entity or existing place that can be found on a map, but also the way in which readers conceive of and understand the literary work. In 1974, Henri Lefebvre discusses the relationship between social life and space in *The Production of Space*, he classifies three separated areas in theoretical level: the physical space, the psychological space and social space. In other words, the three areas are the nature, the mental space and the discourse construction of space. In literary works, three types of space should connect with each other, making it possible for subjects to move freely among each space. The next chapter will analyze the traumatized protagonist and the role of place from the perspective of the three angles.

### 3. The Traumatized Protagonist and the Role of Place in Recovering

Hemingway's "Soldier's Home", included in the anthology of stories *In Our Time*, presents readers the theme of fear, isolation, faith and traumatic experience by describing the life of a veteran who came from the First World War. The story is narrated in the third person by an unnamed narrator and sets in a bleak, pessimistic and depressing tone. Although having fought in various European arenas, Krebs, the protagonist, is no longer seen as being part of the town or as conforming as other soldiers who returned to hometown. "Space is not a pure objective hollow container, but the product of sociocultural history."<sup>[13]</sup> Xie Na once emphasizes the connection between space and society in his book in 2010. The presence of landscape in literary works is not merely a form of expression, but a critical tool in the process of evaluating narrative stories.

According to Long Diyong, the creation of space and narrative activities are closely related to author's life experiences. The reconstruction of hometown and the process of trauma recovery are the driving force for writers to create literature works. "Soldier's Home" can be one quintessence based on Hemingway's own life career. In 1918, Hemingway sailed to Europe to serve as a volunteer ambulance driver to work with the Red Cross. Within several weeks, he suffered a serious injury on the Italian front. The newspapers "Oak Leaf" and "Chicago Evening Post" reported his story and when he returned home from his injury, the welcome scene was even more grand. But it did not take long before the public lost their interest in this ex-soldier. Hemingway felt the great contrast and missed the time to be a hero. It's not hard to see that Hemingway is the prototype of Krebs and Oak Park is the quintessence of Krebs's hometown in Oklahoma, the place where the narrative story takes place.

The physical space where the protagonist live in is the fundamental level of "space" in the text world. In the "Soldier's Home", the physical spaces are the material environment where Krebs inhabits and kills the time, mainly three areas: his home, front porch and the place where he communicates with others. Mike Crang indicates that "Literary accounts can thus reveal something of how relations to spaces can define social action. Such relationships can be the relations of home and away, forbidden and accepted behavior, permitted and transgressive behavior."<sup>[3]</sup> Mental space is the reflection of the physical space into inner world of characters, the change of physical space usually results in the change of mental space. Viewed from many narrative examples, the description of place in the novel's representations of trauma situates the individual's life within a larger cultural context that shapes the memory and value of an event. The representation of space in narrative descriptions of trauma carries individual and social values that direct the understanding and remembrance of trauma. It's also interesting to find that Michelle Balaev regards place as "the silent second character" in his *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*.<sup>[2]</sup> Physically, the image of home stands for safety, protection, comfort and support, it is often compared to harbor metaphorically. Behind the protection of household, one's mental space is also secured. As for Krebs, he no longer considers home as his protection and assistance. Krebs's mother attempts to encourage him toward a "constructive" path, suggesting that he look for a job and attend church with her. On the one hand, Krebs still suffers from trauma arises from his experiences in the war and the inadaptation when he gets back home. On the other hand, it's commonly acknowledged for socioeconomic request that stable job is the best choice. Krebs was a war hero but the moment his mother compared him with common people his self-esteem was hurt. Krebs now finds it hard to pray with his mother and he can do nothing but palter his family. Having experienced the change of space from battlefield to home, Krebs not only fails to recover from trauma, his senses of detachment and isolation keep growing. The faithful, comforting and supportive images of household become unfamiliar to him. Due to dislocation from his land and people, Krebs has to undergo mental stress caused by alienation from his hometown.

Social space is a production as well as reflection of society. Xie Na points out that the alienation of people's social life can result in the conflicts and separation of communication. Therefore, space becomes the place where people feel alienated, being oppressed and manipulated. In this case, the space production connects with ideology under the influence of social power control. Ideology becomes a set of spatial planning organization which rises the repression and high demand of physical space. Individual who lives in here will be accustomed to the set of rules and internalize oneself for social convention. In the context of concluded First World War, veterans did not receive ideal treatment. Not only did they have to suffer from physical trauma like blindness or deafness, the pension provided by government was far from adequate for them to live on. The tendency was to employ the ex-servicemen with low level disability, leaving the severely disabled out of work. Krebs in the story is reluctant to get a job even if his father promised him a car, those evidences imply the difficulty for a ex-serviceman to find to job. Town center, is another place where Krebs experienced mental trauma. Apart from the lack of bare necessities of life, the inability for veterans to maintain normal daily

contacts with friends and neighbors is another reason leading to their separation from fellow citizens. Men who had been outgoing before the war were now taciturn and perplexed by their delusions and nightmares, he received nothing rather than “being welcomed elaborately”. The huge contrast with others made him disappointed and the reluctance to communicate with other citizens started to grow. Ironically, later when he felt the need to talk, no one was interested to hear about it any more. It is a type of silent violence appeared in the town center where no one takes Krebs for granted.

Front porch, the physical space where Krebs reads books, plays the clarinet and most importantly, watches girls. It is also the place where his love trauma reveals. It's noticeable that despite his detachment from others, Krebs still shows interest in looking at girls in town, which may implies his longing for making a connection with passion, love and intimacy though he lacks enough courage to do it. In “Soldier's Home”, by using six 'like' in a row, Hemingway shows that Krebs's desire for intimacy with girls. However, instead of devoting efforts or time, he resists any consequences and committed relationship. Hemingway also uses three short sentences all containing “did not want” to place an emphasis on showing how adamant Krebs is. Front porch, the symbol of his love trauma, did not appear in the second half of the story, this may imply Krebs's failure to reconnect with girls. As one classic symbol of Lost Generation, Krebs shows the indifference of caring others and planning his own future. The war didn't take away his sexual desire but the courage to be a responsible man. In Michelle Balaev's *The Nature of Trauma in American Novels*, he indicates the importance of place in the recovery of trauma: “The narrative recall of the past by the traumatized protagonist suggests that retelling the traumatic past to another is less important than reconnecting to the land with its human, natural, and mythic histories that help the person reestablish a relationship to the social community of his home.”<sup>[2]</sup> In “Soldier's Home”, physical space including Krebs's home, town center and front porch are all the place deepen his trauma instead of helping him recover. The protagonist's alienation and inability to fit in the society in this novel is also a strategy to show emotional suffering, confusion and dissociation. Of all the factors that result in Krebs's trauma, cultivating a relationship to the society may play an essential role in Krebs's healing. Meanwhile, the isolation and misunderstanding Krebs perceived from his family and society failed to disengage him from traumatic experience. Through spatial narrative writing and relating to Hemingway's own experience, “Soldier's House” shows that the First World War deprived youths of their life purpose, passion for love and directly generated the sentiment of feeling lost and confused.

#### 4. Spatial Theory in “The Killers”

Short story “The Killers” in *Men without Women* is one classic masterpiece which gives a vivid description of one special fight in Illinois. Unlike other typical code hero of Hemingway's later fiction, the characters in “The Killers” choose to surrender which is as much a violation of the code hero's persona as suicide is. The constant shift of space dissolve the authority and solemnity of linear timeline. Space becomes the carrier of narration, as is not just a backdrop against which the story takes place, but in itself the plot thruster and tension maker.

As mentioned above, Henri Lefebvre proposes three concept of space, he also regards the physical space as the “perceived space”<sup>[8]</sup> that can be achieved through human's perception to space, which is “the most abstract process of social production, reproduction, cohesion and structuration”.<sup>[12]</sup> In “The Killers”, the Henry's lunchroom is a physical place that can be perceived by readers. The scene of the story opens in a restaurant where the potential murder will take place. As the first scene of story, the diner shows that the misalignments of expectation and reality are minor, but further the plot for the story's major instance of subverted expectation: when Ole receives Nick's warning but chooses to resign to his death—a betrayal of expectation of both Nick's world and reader's mind. The second scene of story is Old's home. Nick feels that he needs to do something to help Ole, but fails when he finds Ole is resigned to his fate. Old's home is the space which shows Nick's subsequent naivety and disillusionment compared to experienced and mature George. He innocently assumes that “it was just a bluff” and Ole will be fine. Unlike other characters who presents courage and dignity Hemingway writes, Ole is unable to get out of bed and barely willing to speak, he plans to “make up his mind to go out”—and, presumably, meet his death. The final physical space backs to the diner. Nick realizes that what he thought was an act of bravery was foolish and pointless. Instead of staying at town and struggling with the reality, Nick's impulse is to get away from this difficult situation. This attitude shift shows Nick is more mature to know that he can't change fate but the failure to convince himself live with the reality of that fate. The reappearance of diner indicates a progression of maturity from young idealists like Nick, who naively believes he can forestall death and evil, to middle aged men George, who prefers to ignore inevitable death, then to Ole, the man who accepts his death and acts according.

But this progression also implies their inability to face evil and fight against fate.

In Lefebvre's spatial triads, he also mentions the term "representational space", which refers to "space as directly lived through its associated images and symbols."<sup>[8]</sup> The space can be endowed with metaphorical and representational meanings. The setting in the diner can be regarded as the 20 century<sup>th</sup> Chicago, a society full of violence, the living proof of the trauma Hemingway experienced. Criminal activities are rampant in the so-called most civilized society of the world. The shift of space constructs several images in reader's mind: the horror pervaded in the diner, the inevitable despair Ole can't escape from, the innocence and naivety of Nick. Those physical spaces integrate with social space and mental space, creating an image of young man who suffers from the miserable condition of moral and ethical values in American society where people are too selfish and materialistic too see beyond their personal ends, where citizens are no longer under the protection of police or law enforcement agencies but dominated by big guns.

## 5. Conclusion

Since the 20<sup>th</sup> century, space form has been considered as an important form of literature that embodies the value measure of human. Meanwhile, with the end of the First World War, human confront with crises in psyche. Absence of love, power discipline and value decadence are vividly displayed through the constructed space of living, working and leisure in topographical level. This thesis, taking spatial theory as theoretical basis, has made a detailed analysis of the spatial narrative in Hemingway's "Soldier's Home" and "The Killers" from three aspects of physical, mental and social space with a combination of spatial images. These features of space not only are conducive to construct the space in the story world but also drive the narrative and reflect the mentality of protagonists. By breaking linearity of temporal sequence through arranging temporal duration and frequency as well as weakening time markers, Hemingway constructs disconnected spaces and the disordered status of human's physical and psychological life in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Krebs, an ex-serviceman who is disillusioned and alienated from the society and Nick, a man who is initially naive and becomes confused, terrified and lost after witnessing the incapability of human. He depicts the society as the space where miserable condition of moral and ethical values degrade and people are too selfish and materialistic too see beyond their personal ends, where citizens are no longer under the protection of police or law enforcement agencies but dominated by big guns, where veterans can't enjoy normal life but suffers from social isolation. Through discussion about the space constructed in the novel on the basis of spatial theory, it can be found that spaces in "Soldier's Home" and "The Killers" make great contributions to promote the various meanings generation and theme expression.

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