An Analysis of Physical Space in *More Die of Heartbreak*

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DOI: 10.64649/yh.eg.issn3078-4794.20260519

Abstract: Saul Bellow's novel *More Die of Heartbreak* centers on modern people's entanglements with romantic relationships and kinship and struggles against adverse societal forces. Analyzing the novel from the perspective of spatial narrative can help readers gain a better understanding. This paper mainly explores the physical space (natural space, domestic space and public space), and finds that the protagonist Benn gains strength from natural objects, and takes natural space as his spiritual refuge; some small and modest domestic space serve as sites for reflection, rest, healing and inner tranquility, while the luxurious ones are alienating and oppressive; public space carries multiple functions but on the whole embodies the complexity of human nature compared to the purity of the protagonist's spiritual world. These spatial characteristics are the products of the negative side of modernity.

Keywords: *More Die of Heartbreak*; literary narrative; physical space; modernity

0. Introduction

The novel *More Die of Heartbreak* is a masterpiece created by American writer Saul Bellow in 1987. It mainly focuses on the desire and struggle of the main character Benn in his second marriage, which is narrated from his nephew, Kenneth, who also suffers from difficulties in love. Dialogues between the two men and reflection of Kenneth run through the whole story, with various shifts of physical space indicating profound rich metaphorical meanings.

In literary narrative analysis, space is a key factor with multiple dimensions. According to Gabriel Zoran's spatial narrative theory (1984), space can be divided into three levels: the topographical level, the chronotopic level and the textual level. The first level focuses on the static state of space, the second on the dynamic and the third linguistic presentation. Thus, this multi-layer analysis allows readers to gain a deeper insight into the role of space in literary works. Fang (2016) points out that physical space, mental space and social space are the three major types of space.

Quite a number of researchers analyze literary works from the above two perspectives, such as Yang and Jia (2025) have a discussion on Japanese writer Hase Seishu's collection of stories *The Boy and the Dog*, exploring the living environment of the people in these stories from the three aspects of topographical space, chronotopic space, and textual space. Wang (2022) also applies Zoran's theory to analyze French writer Leïla Slimani's novel, *Lullaby*, focusing on the construction of space in terms of geography, temporality and gender. Gao (2014) analyzes Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse-Five* from three dimensions: physical space, social space and psychological space, and points out that the three types of space represent a symbolic system in Vonnegut's novels. Zhou and Deng (2023) make an analysis of British writer Ballantyne's novel *The Coral Island* from the perspectives of the three types of space.

The novel *More Die of Heartbreak* encompasses a wide range of spatial sites which carry far-reaching implications. Few studies focus on this perspective. Ji (2013) explores the images of the Electric Tower and the village of hometown, and reveals the conflict of two morals behind the images. Wu and Zhang (2024) examine women's struggle for power from a spatial perspective. Therefore, based on the above theory and categories of space, this paper intends to analyze physical space in the novel, static and dynamic, with rich textual illustrations, and further investigate its embedded mental and social implications, combining the different spatial

dimensions discussed above. As to the classification of physical space, the paper classifies topographical sites by their nature, namely, natural, domestic and public space. Through textual analysis, this paper examines how these spaces carry psychological and social significance alongside characters' actions or with static state.

1. Natural Space

In *More Die of Heartbreak*, few panoramic landscapes appear, for its development is largely driven by dialogue and reflection. A notable depiction of natural scenery occurs when Benn and Matilda stay in the Berkshires before their Christmas-week wedding, wandering country paths to admire autumn foliage, ripe apples and late-blooming flowers. The beautiful scenery indicates a temporary serenity far away from urban social entanglements.

More discrete natural objects populate the novel. Bellow priorities natural images, especially the plants. Benn, an eminent botanist, has long been immersed in botanical research, and formed a strong bond with plants. The purity of the world of plants has nurtured the purity of his inner world, just as Bellow depicts in the book, "he represented (seemed to represent) the old innocence of the days before so many inertias were overcome" (Bellow, 2007: 8) .

Benn gains spiritual strength from plants. During the wedding ceremony, it is the Layamons' Christmas tree, a balsam fir, that empowers him to endure the wedding process while facing so many high-status guests, all strangers to him.

Throughout the novel, two natural objects are repeatedly mentioned. One is the Arctic lichens; the other is azalea. Kenneth makes a comment on Benn's Arctic lichens research "…there's an important, a basic life question at the bottom of his research" (Bellow, 2007: 308). Most of the existence of these Arctic lichens is "solid ice", "but at the lightest warming they revive and even grow a bit. This can go for thousands of years" (Bellow, 2007: 309). Benn cannot resist the attraction of the frigid Arctic environment for it can bring him tranquility, clarity and concentration, shielding him from the disturbance of the outside world.

In this novel, the arctic lichens carry multiple symbolic implications. They survive in extremely harsh conditions, which shows that they are remarkably resilient. Growing in such pure, marginal and remote space, they possess a quality of purity free from external contamination. Therefore, they form the foundation of Benn's inner world, and their habitats remain a retreat for Benn to escape from the external world. And this is just what Benn does at the end of the novel. He wants to flee from the marriage with Matilda, and is on his way to the North Pole to check out lichens.

As for the other natural object, azalea, it is to some degree special. The Arctic lichens, in space, are remote from daily life, while the azalea is in the office of Jo Layamon, Benn's mother-in-law, a natural object in social environment. Benn has been drawing strength from the azalea when living with the Layamons for his alienation from the family. Trapped in the pressure from Matilda to claim a fortune swindled by his uncle Vilitzer, and the distress upon learning that Vilitzer wouldn't last long, Benn "really had to have plant contact" (Bellow, 2007:292), and wants to get closer to the azalea, but just finds that it is a phony. The plant has been supporting him for a long time, but it turns out to be artificial. This is a sharp irony. It actually mirrors the fake nature of the Layamons and the fraudulent marriage. The finding throws him out of control and drives him to take some kind of action to change the current situation.

2. Domestic Space

Domestic space in this novel appears with high frequency. This mainly includes Kenneth's parents' home, Kenneth's dorm, Treckie's home, Dita's apartment, Benn's apartment, the Layamons' duplex, Matilda's apartment at the Roanoke, and Vilitzer's house.

These domestic places can be roughly divided into two categories. One is small, modest and

ordinary living places such as Kenneth's dorm and Benn's apartment, the other is mainly about the luxurious places belonging to the Layamon family.

In Kenneth's dorm, he often indulges himself in deep thought. He meditates on his pursuit for making his life a turning point, his own predicament, Benn's struggle in plight, and his relationship with his parents and his ex-girlfriend Treckie. Also, with this tiny room, he links these thoughts with the grand themes of American society, philosophy, history, politics and so on. He engages in warm dialogue with his friend Dita in her small department, and he reaches a tentative reconciliation with Treckie in her home with their daughter nearby. It should also be noted that Kenneth and his uncle Benn meet and talk in the apartment or the dorm.

These places belong to modest domestic spaces, providing quiet, genuine and ideal spiritual support for Kenneth. On the contrary, since Benn falls in love with Matilda, the places Benn sets foot in mostly fall into the second category of space, the luxurious one. He lives in a duplex with the Layamons "every morning wandering in the long rooms of Persian rugs and decorator drapes, lighted cabinets of Baccarat and Wedgwood" (Bellow, 2007:125). And Matilda plans to live with him in the Roanoke which Matilda's old aunt left to her, a huge building with about twenty rooms apiece.

Benn is out of place in these residences. "It wasn't the objects that bothered him but the persistent sense of being in a false position" (Bellow, 2007:118). He cannot adapt to its daily routines, the conversation and the servants' service. At the beginning, he tries to fit into their life, trying to read more to find appropriate economic and political topics, but fails. He tries to adjust to Matilda's daily routine, and struggle to find common ground in conversation, but also fails. He lingers in the struggle until he finds the azalea is fake.

Actually, Benn does not realize that these places belong to a profit-driven world, which is incompatible with his pure spiritual realm. He is attracted by Matilda, longing for a loving home, and fails to recognize that he, Matilda, and her family hold divergent values. Therefore, he suffers a lot from this disparity, which echoes the title of the novel *More Die of Heartbreak*.

Vilitzer's house is also a structure piled up with money, big, elaborate, cruiser, palms, servants, but it appears at the end of the novel together with Vilitzer's death. On the one side, it is a world of money, capital, endless commercial and political rivalry and calculation; on the other hand, death puts an end to everything. Naturally, the house is a complex of contradictions, full of sharp irony and hollow prosperity.

It is worth noting that domestic space has been invaded by external world to varying degrees. One of typical scenes is that Dr. Layamon talks at length over dinner, about the private clinic, the hospital, the patients who are developers, bankers, bond experts… Their conversation is saturated with interests, money and interpersonal dealings. What should be a place for familial bonding and affectionate exchange is intruded by materialism of the external world.

3. Public Space

Public space in this novel includes several kinds with different functions, such as public space of power and administration, commercial and professional space, social and consumptive public space. These places work together, trapping Benn in the emotional predicament.

The typical example of public power and administration is the building where the hearing is held. The building is a massive structure, "the work of a provocative, controversial architect trying to outdo the excesses of a similar building in Chicago…" (Bellow, 2007:262). Combined with the description of the hearing, it can be inferred that the building in fact embodies the arrogance and performativity of modern bureaucratic power, for the hearing turns out to be a media show where the governor manipulates the process without considering the privacy and suffering of individuals.

As for the commercial and professional space, the Electronic Tower is often mentioned. It is the building that causes financial dispute between Benn and Vilitzer. It enjoys a long history, in which Benn's memory of his childhood lies. It represents the vitality of modern business, but at the same time, it poses a threat to Benn who is under consistent pressure from the Layamons to claim money from Vilitzer due to this building. Benn says that "Unless you pull the drapes, the Electronic Tower is staring down at you all during dinner" (Bellow, 2007: 120), indicating that Benn suffers a lot from the building's oppression. It is a kind of oppression produced by materialism and capitalism.

Also, in this novel, the description of hospital space is loaded with profound meanings. Dr. Layamon brings Benn to his hospital, with Benn exposed to the unpleasant scenes of those elderly female patients with hip injuries. Benn is shocked at cruel aging and body decay, which sheds a shadow on his idealistic vision of love and existence. Dr. Layamon, in this scene, plays a role of a manipulator, and wants Benn to be intimated by the scene, hoping Benn to see the world according to his will and logic which are in essence materialistic, utilitarian, and realistic.

Social and consumptive space in this novel mainly refers to shopping places, restaurants, cinema, and vacation spots. Among these, the restaurant the Avignon is impressive which is at the top of the building, skyscraper summit. The dining room, glass-enclosed, is on the seventy-fifth story, so high that far away from the ordinary life. It is, by its very nature, an artificial world and a vanity fair.

These public places form a formidable force, together with the Layamons, a calculating and greed-driven family, close in on Benn, and Benn's mental plight arises accordingly. Modern cities have produced a large array of functional public places, with many of them permeated by capital logic, thus it is inevitable that intimate relationships are under great pressure of this force. Under such circumstances, it is difficult for people to form pure romantic relationships without regard to status, identity and money. This is the reason why so many people may suffer from marriage and love, which is corresponding to the title of the novel *More Die of Heartbreak*.

4. The Modernity Predicaments behind Physical Space

According to Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory, physical space is not merely a neutral objective container for activities, but a tangible carrier rich in social and spiritual implications (Fu, 2023). All physical spaces in this novel, with the exception of those natural objects in nature, are all the social products containing profound meanings which are closely related to modernity. It is known to all that modernity brings progress to the development of the world, but at the same time, it also generates manifold predicaments. These predicaments pervade in the physical spaces in the novel.

The domestic space, including the Layamons' duplex, Matilda's apartment at the Roanoke, and Vilitzer's house are luxurious, is constructed by capital, a visible symbol of wealth, status, consumerism, and materialism, distinguishing social ranks and governing interpersonal bonds. Even the azalea, originally a natural object, in Benn's mother-in-law's studio, turns out to be a fabricated artifact which shatters his desire to connect with nature and gain spiritual strength to support himself. In the Layamons' duplex and Matilda' s apartment, Matilda's hidden ambition to exploit Benn's status and acquire his possible inheritance is revealed. Similarly, in the two places, Benn's inner struggle revolving around whether to assimilate himself into the family or to remain himself gradually unfolds. These are the concrete manifestations of modernity predicaments.

While in Vilitzer's opulent house, crowds of celebrities are mourning his death, but this is accompanied by formal social rituals and elite networking. Vilitzer departs the world in this luxurious house which is a typical marker of Vilitzer's social status, but his death is still surrounded by the domination of status symbols and utilitarian social codes. Such domination is a representative feature of the negative sides of modernity. Exposed to such a scene, Benn actually encounters the grand predicament of modernity and is trapped in the predicament of his own life wavering between escaping from the reality to the distance and remaining within these existing

relationships.

The public space, in this novel, mainly referring to the building where the hearing is held, the Electronic Tower and the restaurant the Avignon, is also the space where modernity predicaments occur. In these places lies performative, utilitarian and status-oriented logic of modernity. The governor's words and deeds, Dr. Layamon's chats with Benn, and the overwhelming sense of oppression brought by the Electronic Tower, are combined together to reveal how social interaction that is supposed to be genuine and spontaneous turns out to be a tool for status display, interest exchange and ostentation of power.

Unlike domestic spaces, where predicaments occur under the disguise of family affection and kinship, public spaces show predicaments more directly. In these places, personal emotion and genuine love often cannot rival the pursuit of utility, more wealth, higher social status and greater access to resources. These features reflect the same operating set of rules in the domestic spaces discussed above. At their root, these phenomena arise from the negative impact of modernity. Roaming from the hearing room to the Electronic Tower and the fancy restaurant the Avignon, Benn is surrounded by the heavy and oppressive atmosphere, coming to realize that he is gradually constrained by social rules despite his efforts to struggle. The pressures accumulating in these public spaces, together with those form domestic spaces, deepen his inner dilemma, disturb his inner tranquility and intensifies his urge to escape from reality.

Yet there still exist space for people to resist such predicaments. Kenneth's dorm, Dita's apartment and Benn's department are relatively tranquil and private places free from the disturbance of the outside world. In these places, the two men can take a rest and gain moments of inner tranquility and self-reflection. The spaces serve as temporary shelters and prepare them to navigate their ensuing journeys with greater spiritual strength.

5. Conclusion

The novel *More Die of Heartbreak* is full of people's entanglements in romantic love, kinship and marriage. And physical space contributes a lot to the depiction of these entanglements. In fact, space is not merely a background or setting, but also takes various forms, performs narrative functions with multiple dimensions, and carries rich aesthetic and ideological connotations.

This paper mainly focuses on physical space in this novel, which actually refers to both the topographical level and the chronotopic level of space according to Gabriel Zoran's classification. Also, physical space, no matter static or dynamic, can be further divided into natural space, domestic space and public space.

In this novel, purely scenic depiction of natural space is rare, while natural objects are mentioned with higher frequency, especially the Arctic lichens and azalea. The two are the source of Benn's spiritual strength, with the former serving as a place for escape from reality, and the latter first deception and finally a trigger of awakening. Domestic space in this novel mainly falls into modest and luxurious space. The former is ordinary but can make the main characters stay calm and achieve spiritual healing, and the latter is luxurious but hypocritical, disingenuous and calculating. To some degree, the domestic space has been invaded by materialism and capitalism. That is why the main characters are often trapped in emotional struggles, because their serene space is compressed. And public space in this novel belongs to the world of money, consumption, and vanity fair.

The physical space in this novel contains abundant meanings, which is related to its deep-rooted source of "heartbreak". This is closely related to the negative sides of modernity. In modernity, if people prioritize interests, money, and the extraction and exchange of resources, nonstandard aesthetic experience, pure and ideal love, and poetic sensibility will be marginalized, and romantic relationship and identity may be transformed into instruments of interest exchange. In

this sense, the title *More Die of Heartbreak* indicates modern spiritual suffering. And escape is just temporary, just as the translator Wu points out that "intellectuals are doomed to have no escape in a society fully dominated by desire" (Bellow, 2022: 415).

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