

## A Study of Charles Dickens' Great Expectations from the Perspective of Space Narrative

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**Abstract:** *The extremely high artistic value of Dickens' novels, attracted an endless stream of scholars to study both the writer and his novels with various approaches. Based on the principles of narratology, this paper takes Dickens' later-stage representative work Great Expectations as the research object, refines and summarizes its typical space narrative and divides it into such three categories as confusing mysterious space, indifferent social space and self-pitying psychological space. Starting from the composition of each narrative space, this thesis analyses how the three categories of narrative space are developed, and expounds the role of different categories of space in the text by analyzing their different ways of expression and different narrative techniques, and then explores the relationships among and implications of the three typical categories of narrative space.*

**Keywords:** Dickens, confusing mysterious space, indifferent social space, self-pitying psychological space, space narrative

### Introduction

Charles Dickens is a great realistic writer in Victorian England. His position in the history of English literature is beyond all doubt. Austrian writer Zweig (1998) comments on Dickens, saying that he is "the only great writer of the 19th century, whose novels are the highest expression of British tradition in literature" (45-46). Together with Thackeray, Bronte and Mrs. Gaskell, Dickens is ranked among "a group of outstanding novelists in modern Britain" (296) by Marx. Dickens left 15 full-length novels, more than 20 novellas, one informal essay, two long travelogues, hundreds of pieces of prose and short stories for the world.

Throughout the past two centuries, experts and scholars have explored various aspects of Dickens' novels. Nevertheless, there are still some aspects remaining to be studied. For example, few papers have approached Dickens' novels by applying the principles of narratology (Frank, 1945). "Narratology is a literary theory that has emerged in Western Europe since the 1960s. Adopting the principles of structuralist linguistics, it appears to be very unique and is endowed with abundant new ideas" (Yang, 1997, p.424). Fiction is mainly an art of narrative. With people's increasing attention, theory of narrative has gradually become a tool for the study of fictions. "Without the theory of narratology, we can hardly analyze novels or make comments" (Jin, 2001). But the fact is that most of the papers concerning Dickens' novels already published mainly study the narrator, characters in the novel, narrative language and other aspects, and few of them focus on the unique space narrative showed in his novel, which leaves much space for deep research on this aspect.

Any narrative work develops and connects spatial scenes in chronological order. For example, the activities of characters in the novel, the symbolic description of scenes, and the development of story plots, etc., all happen in certain spatial scenes. As the French scholar

Jean-Yves Tadié (1992) said, “Novel is of both a spatial structure and a temporal structure. It is a spatial structure because of a certain organization and system in a static form; it is a temporal structure because there is no instantaneous reading, for life experiences are always unfolded in time” (224). Bakhtin (1998) also believes that “In the artistic chronotope of literature, symbols of space and time are integrated into a concrete whole which has been recognized. Time concentrates, condenses and becomes artistically visible here; space tends to be tense and is involved in the movement of time, plot and history. Symbols of time are displayed in space, and space is understood and measured through time” (274-275). Therefore, the narrative space and narrative time in the narrative text are both important components of the novel that cannot be ignored.

A typical space narrative structure exists in *Great Expectations*, Dickens’ (2003) later representative work, among his 15 full-length novels. In terms of the external space background for the creation of *Great Expectations* and its internal space structure, the narrative space in this novel is rational and inevitable, which reflects Dickens’ exquisite artistic techniques and profound creative intentions. On the basis of a close reading of the text, this paper refines and summarizes the typical narrative space in *Great Expectations*, with an aim to provide a new method and perspective for interpreting Dickens’ works.

### **Space Narrative**

Space narrative, “according to semantics, constitutes the clue and arrangement of a story” (Zhang, 1994, p.5). In other words, space narrative displays many spatial pictures in words in literary works. The organic arrangement, organization and structure of these spatial pictures help form a certain spatial structure and express main ideas. Narrative space according to Chatman (1978) refers to the space of activity or existence of things in the story or event created and processed by the writer. There are two categories of narrative space. One is the objective space, for the characters’ to carry out activities and the events to develop in a novel. Generally, the plots are set to show characters’ personality; the space is set to promote the plot development, and is changed with the change of the characters’ activities and the evolution of the plot. This kind of space needs to display its region, scenery, social and cultural environment completely. The other is psychological space, which provides the space for the characters’ psychological consciousness activities in the novel...Psychological space, as is described in *The Mark on the Wall*, may have no integrity or clarity of narrative space in a strict sense, or may have a holistic space, as is expressed in Joyce’s *Ulysses*. However, it is a place where conscious activity “cuts off several different behaviors that occur simultaneously again and again” (Wu, 2009, p.63); and where the chronological order is removed; and all kinds of images and implications, symbols and associations that dissociate from the narrative process are juxtaposed are integrated, to form a whole. Readers need to read the novel repeatedly to remember images and implications through reflections, and combine each segment to reconstruct the narrative space.

From the perspective of the external space background of Dickens’ creation of *Great Expectations*, the novel reflects the life of the townspeople in Victorian England in the 19th century. Since Britain is an island country geographically, it is different from the mainland countries, especially in the layout and style of space. In Britain, different classes hold different views on space buildings. Rural people prefer the Arcadian architecture, while people living in urban areas like the Baroque architecture better. Different architectural styles reflect people’s different views on things, which provide the narrative space in *Great Expectations* with a broad social background and significance.

From the perspective of its internal space background, *Great Expectations* tells the story that Pip tried to maintain his inner purity and kindness, but could hardly resist the hypocrisy and cunning in the pursuit of money and beauty. He was caught in a dilemma. People tend to take the false appearances of daily life to be true and thus believe in the spatial relationship between things fixed by tradition. They not only distort the real essential relationship between things, but also make things far away from each other, unable to contact each other directly, and unable to come together across huge space. Dickens really makes it possible in *Great Expectations* that, Pip, the protagonist, was able to shuttle freely between the real world and the impossible world in reality, and the two spaces were interwoven indivisibly. In order to truly understand the writer's creative intention, readers must understand the relationship between relationships and functions of different narrative spaces in the text on the basis of mastering the narrative time in the text.

Three categories of narrative space in *Great Expectations* are defined, i.e. in confusing mysterious space, different social space and self-pitying psychological space. Starting with the composition of each narrative space, this paper aims to analyze how these three narrative spaces are fully developed one by one through narration and how they are freely transformed, as well as different ways of expression and different narrative techniques to create the three different narrative spaces, and their respective roles in the text. Especially, this paper neither negates nor neglects the role of narrative time in *Great Expectations* while focusing on discussing the narrative space in the text.

## Space Narrative in *Great Expectations*

### *1. Confusing Mysterious Space*

The confusing mysterious space in *Great Expectations* is shown in Satis House where Miss Havisham lives and Wemmick's Walworth Castle. Their signifier meanings exceed their signified meanings: they both exist in the real world of Pip's life, but a door, and a suspension bridge cut off any connection between them and the real world. In this way, Dickens create an "impossible worlds in the possible world" which is elusive. In this space, Dickens used a lot of weird techniques and narrative signs with strong implications to vividly show the strange people and the strange environment in these two mysterious spaces to the readers. They exist in the society in which Pip lives, but also dissociate from the society, which seems confusing. These two mysterious spaces are the embodiment of extreme good and evil in real society. When Pip entered Satis House, he would become "evil", and when he returned to reality, he would become snobby and hypocritical. When he walked into Walworth Castle, he would become kind, and when he came back to reality, he would become sincere and always be ready to help others. Pip was always struggling and wandering on the edge of good and evil. These two mysterious spaces with different styles influenced Pip's growth invisibly. Their existence not only makes the narrative space in the text diversified, but also guides readers to understand Dickens' real intention.

Satis House (Foucalt, 1975) was believed to be a mysterious place by young Pip and the people around him: "I had heard of Miss Havisham up to town – everybody for miles round, had heard of Miss Havisham up town – as an immensely rich and grim lady who lived in a large and dismal house barricaded against robbers, and who led a life of seclusion" (*Great Expectations*, 89). From the impression it left on the people around, we could see its inaccessibility and mystery. When young Pip first saw the house, he was surprised to see that the bricks and tiles were old and gloomy:

“Within a quarter of an hour we came to Miss Havisham’s house, which was of old brick, and dismal, and had a great many iron bars to it. Some of the windows had been walled up; of those that remained, all the lower were rustily barred. There was a court-yard in front, and that was barred” (*Great Expectations*, 95).

Dickens showed the true face of such a space isolated from the outside world through a child’s eyes, the desolation and terror there. It is in this space that the evil thought came to young Pip. He wanted to be a “superior man”, and thus begun his pursuit of the “great expectations” he dreamed of.

Walworth Castle was a mysterious place located in Woolwood District, London:

“It appeared to be a collection of back lanes, ditches, and little gardens, and to present the aspect of a rather dull retirement. Wemmick’s house was a little wooden cottage in the midst of plots of garden, and the top of it was cut out and painted like a battery mounted with guns ...

I highly commended it, I think it was the smallest house I ever saw; with the queerest gothic windows (by far the greater part of them sham), and a gothic door, almost too small to get in at.

‘That’s a real flagstaff, you see,’ said Wemmick, ‘and on Sundays I run up a real flag. Then look here. After I have crossed this bridge, I hoist it up – so – and cut off the communication’” (*Great Expectations*, 365).

In this narrow but warm space, Pip realized the true meaning of kindness and beauty in the world. He temporarily got rid of the idea of being a superior man and many distracting thoughts, and began to experience affection between family members. Meanwhile, he doubted some of his unrealistic ideas.

“Space elements have important narrative functions. Novelists not only regard space as the place where the story happens and the scenes necessary for narration, but also use space to express time, arrange the structure of the novel, and even to promote the whole narrative process.” Situated in a small town, Satis House is a pastoral mansion that has grown from prosperity to ruin. While Walworth Castle is located in a dark corner of London, which becomes warm and beautiful from being dark and humid. Dickens intentionally put these two spaces with similar essence but opposite growing trends together, and used grotesque techniques and typical narrative signs to form an “impossible world” in the “possible world” which is incompatible with the real society.

Aristotle’s (2000) *Poetics* gave the earliest account of the “possible world” and the “impossible world”: “An impossible thing that can be believed (Note: an impossible thing, if handled well, may become a credible one) is more desirable than a possible thing that cannot be believed; but the plot should not consist of unreasonable things . . . Even an absurd thing can be adopted” (p.21). Here Aristotle’s distinction between the possible world and the impossible world is out of logical judgment. In modern society, with the gradual development and maturation of literature, the distinction between the possible world and the impossible world has also changed. The “possible world” today actually refers to the known world, the world we describe according to what we know, or the world in which sequences can be realized within the limits of knowledge. While the “impossible world” is an imagined world, and the object of fantasy can never be realized in real life. Therefore, from the perspective of the judgment of the possible world and the impossible world by the modern people, the author of this paper believes that the confusing mysterious space in *Great Expectations* can

be established as the “impossible world” in the possible world (the real society Pip lives in). Such an “impossible world” full of grotesque color exists both in reality and out of reality. At the same time, it is indispensable in the text, and plays a guiding role for readers to understand Dickens’ real intention.

The reason why the confusing mysterious space exists and forms the “impossible world” in the possible world is that it is impossible for such a gloomy and terrible world of Satis House and such an extremely beautiful world of Walworth Castle to exist in real society. Bachelard (1994) believes that the house, attic, cellar, drawer, box, cabinet, nest, corner, etc. are all prototype images in space narratives, and have a certain sense of privacy, vastness, hugeness, internal and external sense, and round sense. There are similar modes of human perception or acceptance of these spatial intentions, but there are also spiritual reflections of individual differences. This kind of spiritual reflection is attributed to the “real sense of the function of living space”, while the need for the use of real housing, furniture and space could only show the source of its practical significance in these key links of spiritual reflection through Bachelard’s so-called “place analysis”. In Satis House, Miss Havisham has changed from a girl who is infatuated with love to a woman who is moody and resentful, and Pip has become snobby and hypocritical from a simple and kind boy. In Walworth Castle, Wemmick has become to a good man who shows filial piety to his father, helps his friends and cares about his wife, and Pip has turned from snobbery and hypocrisy to kindness and sincerity. This leads readers to hold dialectical attitude towards the people and things in the text. That is, there is no absolute good or evil in the world. Good people, driven by evil, and vice versa. Dickens’ attitude towards the person who has corrected his evil is affirmative and sympathetic. In the confusing mysterious space, a gate and a suspension bridge form dividing line between it and the social space, and also become a “door” for the narrator to move from one space to another. However, the two spaces are not isolated and irrelevant, but are interrelated, on the contrary, they are interrelated and inseparable in the text.

## 2. *Indifferent Social Space*

In *Great Expectations*, the indifferent social space (Lefebvre, 1991) is composed of a series of places in the real society where Pip lives in. Different living places have different influences on Pip’s growth. On the one hand, the indifferent social space shows the complexity and variability of society. On the other hand, it not only enriches Pip’s life experience, but also shapes Pip’s complex personality. All in all, it plays an irreplaceable role in the process of Pip’s maturity from childishness.

“Social space is neither one of many affairs nor one of many products...It is the result of a series of consecutive operations and consequently cannot be reduced to some simple object...It is the result of past actions. It permits certain actions to occur, implies some actions, but prohibits other actions at the same time.” Within the indifferent social space, in Joe’s family, Joe’s such virtues as sincerity, diligence and generosity have always influenced Pip:

“Joe’s forge adjoined our house, which was a wooden house, as many of the dwellings in our country were – most of them, at that time. When I ran home from the churchyard, the forge was shut up, and Joe was sitting alone in the kitchen. Joe and I being fellow-sufferers, and having confidences as such” (*Great Expectations*, 12).

In Pip’s pursuit of money and women, when he was corrupted by some desire for enjoyment and unenterprising ideas and became depraved, there was always a deep sense of guilt in his heart, which laid a foreshadowing for his correction of errors later and functioned as an answer. In Pocket’s family, Dickens narrated Mr. and Mrs. Pocket’s fantastic and

unrealistic behavior through means of Satire. The author's real intention is to criticize the unrealistic "great expectations" imagined by Pip profoundly which could never be realized by means of hypocrisy and cunning. In Jaggers' law office, Pip really realized the harshness and cruelty of the law to the lower class:

"Mr. Jaggers' room was lighted by a skylight only, and was a most dismal place; the skylight, eccentrically pitched like a broken head, and the distorted adjoining houses looking as if they had twisted themselves to peep down at me through it" (*Great Expectations*, 289).

But in this indifferent environment, he also saw a glimmer of hope. It is the help from Wemmick, who has a dual personality. In his own apartment in London, Pip has undergone a complex transformation, suffering from the struggle between the only remaining good ideas such as hypocrisy and cunning. In the end, Pip truly understood the distinctions between the true, good and beautiful and the false, evil, and ugly, thus determined to tune over a new leaf, and come down to earth to pursue his real great expectations. In this way, Pip has also completed the transition from childishness to maturity.

What is wonderful is that in the indifferent social space, Dickens deliberately depicted introduced the "mirror figure" Herbert and Wemmick with a "dual personality", to show the complexity and diversity of real life (Zoran, 1984). This suggest that people like Pip, who are simple, fantastic and lack of social experience, must experience setbacks in order to keep a foothold and grow up in a complex society. "Space is not just a static 'container' or 'platform' for the evolution of social relations. On the contrary, many social spaces today are often full of contradictions and overlap and penetrate into each other. We are not facing one but many social spaces." In addition to displaying the complexity of the real world, the social space in this text, with its suspense, further explains the reason why the confusing mysterious space is isolated from the world. It shows that mysterious space originates from social space and is the epitome of the two worlds of extreme good and evil in social space. However, these two spaces do not directly contact and exchange with each other, but through the self-pitying psychological space, the bridge between them.

### 3. *Self-pitying Psychological Space*

In the beginning, *Great Expectations* is narrated by the narrating self (Soja, 1996), but in narrating his self-experience, it is cut off by the experiential self-back and forth, and the chronological order is removed, and then the narrating self's behavior is appraised, expounded, and repented, thus forming an atmosphere of dialogue between the young Pip ignorant of worldly affairs and the experienced old Pip, including the narrating self's psychological activities and states in the process of growing to the experiential self-step by step. In the text, the author abstractly summarizes it as the self-pitying psychological space.

The role of the self-pitying psychological space in the text cannot be ignored. In the self-pitying psychological space, both the narrating self's narration and psychological activities and the experiential self's explanation, self-blame, and psychological contradictions have great influences on the narrative effect of the story and the readers' acceptance. Some scholars believe that "a strong sense of space is an important aesthetic feature of the narrative space of the novel. It not only enables the reader to be present on the scene and get rich aesthetic enjoyment, but also promotes the reader to understand the fate and psychological activities of the characters more truly, and to grasp the objective basis for the development of the plot more accurately."

In *Great Expectations*, the self-pitying psychological space is the link between the confusing mysterious space and the indifferent social space. Whenever the narrator comes out

of one space and enters the other space, he always say something to describe his psychological changes and state of mind at that time, or there may be the experiential self's explanation and mockery of the narrating self, which arouses the readers' curiosity and makes them look forward to the following story. For example, when Pip stepped out of Satis' House for the first time, he thought he was living a miserable life:

“So, leaving word with the shopman on what day I was wanted at Miss Havisham's again, I set off on the four-mile walk to our forge; pondering, as I went along, on all I had seen, and deeply revolving that I was a common laboring-boy; that my hands were coarse; that my boots were thick; that I had fallen into a despicable habit of calling knaves Jacks; that I was much more ignorant than I had considered myself last night, and generally that I was in a low-lived bad way” (*Great Expectations*, 113).

This is a psychological depiction of the narrating self-coming out of the mysterious space, showing the inner contradictions of young Pip. Immediately after that the experiential self-explained the narrating self' such psychological activity,

“If a dread of not being understood be hidden in the breasts of other young people to anything like the extent to which it used to be hidden in mine – which I consider probable, as I have no particular reason to suspect myself of having been a monstrosity – it is the key to many reservations” (*Great Expectations*, 114).

These two passages are the narrating self's communication with the experiential self for the first time on coming back to the social space from the mysterious space. In this way, the plot of the previous section can be maintained relatively independent, and at the same time, it can be closely linked with the plot of the following section.

What's more, when the confusing mysterious space and the indifferent social space perform narrative transformation, they need to resort to a medium, that's why the self-pitying psychological space introduced. For the scenes in two spaces that could not be narrated simultaneously, the self-pitying psychological space acts as a liaison, and then the narrator could narrate the scenes “one after another”. In this way, spatial scenes are transformed under the help of psychological space. For example, when Pip visited Wemmick's castle for the first time, at the time of departure, the writer skillfully accomplished the transformation of narrative space through narrating self and experiential self. Dickens first let the narrating self-describe Wemmick seen inside and outside the castle, and then let the experiential self-make explanations, so that the narrative perspective is transformed from the mysterious space to the social space of Wemmick's life, and then the narration of social space starts. In this way, the narration of synchronic events in the two spaces is completed through the self-pitying psychological space.

## Conclusion

Edgar H. Johnson (1969) believes that of all Dickens' full-length novels, *Great Expectations* “has the most perfect structure and the richest expressions.” In recent years, the study of *Great Expectations* has covered a wide range of fields, but there is few mention of the typical space narrative structure in the text. As a new research method, space narrative is still in the searching and exploring stage, and the theory of space narrative is being further improved. On the basis of close reading of the text, this paper divides *Great Expectations* into such three categories as confusing mysterious space, indifferent social space and self-pitying psychological space. By analyzing how each narrative space is fully developed one by one,

this paper explains the role of different spaces in the text, reveals the true connotation of the work, and reflects Dickens' outlook on life and keynote of literary creation.

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