



A Study of Agatha Christie's Spatial Narrative in *And Then There Were None*

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Abstract. Agatha Christie, the famous British detective novelist, plays a vital role in the field of detective novels around the world. Among her representative works, *And Then There Were None* subverts the convention of linear and diachronic narrative and focuses on space. Based on Gabriel Zoran's theory of spatial narrative, this article explores the spatial structure in *And Then There Were None* from three aspects: the topographical space, the chronotopic space and the textual space. Then, it discusses the impact of the three levels of space on the mystery-creation, the dispositions of the characters, the development of the plot and the sublimation of the themes in the novel.

Keywords: Agatha Christie · *And Then There Were None* · Spatial narrative

1 Introduction

For a long time, time has been regarded as something active and dialectical while space has been considered to be rigid and non-dialectical [1]. As a result, "time and history have occupied a privileged position in the practical and theoretical consciousness of Western Marxist and critical social science" [2]. In the second half of 20th century, scholars began to shift their attention to spatial narrative. Without spatial dimension, the narrative will be incomplete and simplistic [1]. In China, the early researchers mainly conducted analyses on classic literature such as *A Dream of Red Mansions* from the perspective of spatial narrative [3]. However, the use of spatial narrative in some popular fictions is subtler. Agatha Christie, the queen of the detective fiction [4], has produced a number of renowned works which are not confined to time, including the world's best-selling one, *And Then There Were None*.

This article is going to analyse the spatial levels in *And Then There Were None* and their impacts on the novel based on Gabriel Zoran's three levels of space structure: the topographical space, the chronotopic space and the textual space [5].

2 Topographical Space and Its Impacts

According to Gabriel Zoran, the topographical structure is the highest level of reconstruction, regarded as self-existent and independent [5]. It includes the space as static entities, such as a village, a city and an island [5]. It also consists of the spiritual space, such as dreams, illusions and religious beliefs [5].

2.1 Space as Static Entities

In *And Then There Were None*, there are mainly two static entities: the train and Soldier Island.

2.1.1 The Train

The train appears at the beginning of the novel, however, Agatha Christie does not introduce the train's destination. Naturally, suspense is created and readers' curiosity is arisen. With the moving of the train, the story unfolds and readers come to know that the destination is Oakbridge station.

Moreover, it is widely known that the train is a crowded and noisy place where passengers like to talk loudly and move from time to time. However, Agatha Christie gives few even no detailed descriptions about the environment and other passengers on the train. She just describes the train as "a first-class smoking carriage" [6], "Vera Claythorne, in a third-class carriage with five travelers in it" [6], and "there was only one other person in his carriage, an elderly seafaring gentleman with a bleary eye" [6]. It seems that this train is quite peaceful and even a bit of gruesome.

2.1.2 Soldier Island

When those characters are on the train, they sit in their seats with one name haunting in their minds: Soldier Island. Naturally, it pushes readers to wonder why this is their focus, where it is, whether it is their destination of their journey and whether they know each other. But at this moment, Agatha Christie gives no answers to any of these doubts. With an increasing of readers' doubts, the suspense is successfully created. What's more, she makes good use of these mysteries to push the development of the plot and solves the puzzles one by one in the following texts.

After all the characters finally arrive at Soldier Island, they get to know the true color of it. "There was no house visible, only the boldly silhouetted rock with its faint resemblance to a giant head" [6]. "From here there was no land to be seen anywhere" [6]. "Can't land on Soldier Island when there is a south-easterly. Sometimes'tis cut off for a week or more" [6]. From these descriptions, it can be seen that Soldier Island is a desolate even a bit of horrible place. If the weather condition is terrible, Soldier Island is hard to reach and hard to get out. So if people want to get out of the island when there is an emergency, what should they do? Will other people outside the island come to get them out? Or what they can do is just waiting for death? Here, Agatha Christie lays a foreshadowing for the rest of the story. As the plot develops, it later becomes clear that it is due to the special geographical location that none of the characters on the island succeed in escaping from death.

2.2 Spiritual Space

Throughout the novel, there are many descriptions about characters' spiritual space. Analysis will be given from two categories: the spiritual space constructed by thoughts and by dreams and hallucination.

2.2.1 Spiritual Space Constructed by Thoughts

In the novel, Agatha Christie gives ample descriptions about different characters' thoughts. Before all the characters arrive at Soldier Island, they are lost in their various guesses on the train. After they are on the island, they have many suspicions when there is a murder. For example, after the deaths of five characters, there are only five people alive, including Vera Claythorne, Mr. Justice Wargrave, Philip Lombard, Henry Blore and Dr. Armstrong. They sit in the drawing room with thoughts running through their brains.

"It's Armstrong...I saw him looking at me sideways just then...shall I tell them?...Yes, it's Armstrong...He's watching me now..." "They won't get me out! I can take care of myself...But someone knows where it is..." "They're going mad...They'll all go mad...I'll watch the girl. Yes, I'll watch the girl..." [6].

The psychological descriptions of the five characters vividly demonstrate how scared and suspicious they are after suffering from a series of murders. They have no faith in each other and what they can do now is to suspect others and try their best to protect themselves. This is a vivid reflection of human nature. When personal safety and property are endangered, the individual will try his/her best to protect himself/herself and his/her property from danger without considering others. Instead, he/she is wary of others around and has no trust on others all the time. Here, Agatha Christie subtly sublimates the novel's theme.

2.2.2 Spiritual Space Constructed by Dreams and Hallucinations

In the novel, although Agatha Christie gives few descriptions about the characters' dreams and hallucinations, they play a vital role in reflecting the inner voice of the characters.

Taking Dr. Armstrong's dream as an example. In the evening, when Anthony Martson is murdered, Armstrong has a dream. In the dream, he is holding the scalpel ready to do a murder in the operating-room. However, he couldn't see the face on the operating-table. He tries hard to see it clearly but he fails. Then he guesses that the person on the operating-table is Emily Brent because he hates this woman, but is Anthony Martson. Undoubtedly, this is a nightmare for Armstrong. With the development of the plot, readers will know the fact that he once killed a patient on whom he was operating under the influence of alcohol. Taking Vera Claythorne as another example. She has several hallucinations due to tiredness, extreme fear and severe strain. In the evening, after five people have died, Vera goes to her room, tired and afraid. When she opens the door, she begins hallucinating: she could sniff out the sea at St Tredennick on the day Cyril (her previous student) drowned. She is so sure that the smell is true and Hugo (her lover) is waiting for her in the room. Then she feels a cold and wet hand touching her throat. Obviously, it is impossible for Vera to feel the smell of the sea at St Tredennick when she is on Soldier Island and Hugo couldn't be at the island at all. As the story unfolds, the truth has been revealed: Vera once witnessed Cyril's drowning without helping him out with a purpose of letting her lover Hugo inherit the total property. In the cases of Dr. Armstrong and Vera Claythorne, the novel's theme is brought to light. Even though one may use loophole to escape the law sanctions, he/she will suffer mental or physical

torture. He will live a life full of fear, worries and guilt forever, which is much more painful than sentence.

3 Chronotopic Space and Its Impacts

According to Zoran, the chronotopic level includes synchronic space and diachronic space [5]. The former refers to the spatial relationship which is constructed by characters' activities and interrelations in a relatively static space [5]. While the latter means the spatial relationship which is built by characters' activities and interrelations during a period of time [5].

3.1 Synchronic Relations

In this novel, many scenes belong to the category of synchronic space. Agatha Christie describes different characters' behaviors and reactions at the same time, which is convenient for readers to make a comparison among different characters.

Taking the scene at the beginning of the story for example. Agatha Christie introduces what different characters do on their ways to Solider Island at the same time. Mr. Justice Wargrave "lately retired from the bench, puffed at a cigar and ran an interested eye through the political news in *The Times*" [6]. Then he "laid the paper down and glanced out of the window" [6]. He began to recall the gossip on Soldier Island. At the same time, he reread the letter from Constance Culmington, the woman who invited him to soldier Island and tried to think about everything about the woman. General Macarthur "looked out of the carriage window", complaining that these branch line trains were too slow [6]. "Damnable" "And an hour to wait! And he didn't want to wait" [6]. Then he thought about the letter from Owen who he hadn't got it clear yet. Macarthur was also interested in the gossips about Soldier Island. From the different reactions of the two characters on the train, characters' personalities are vividly demonstrated. Wargrave is leisurely and Macarthur is a bit of impatient. Besides, even though all the characters fail to figure out who wrote to them, they go to the island without hesitation. Here, Agatha Christie leaves many mysteries to readers such as why these characters come to the same place at the same time and whether the person who wrote them is the same one. In this way, Agatha Christie creates the suspense at the beginning of the story, leading readers to further read the novel.

3.2 Diachronic Relations

The novel is mainly constructed by diachronic relations. For example, after all the characters hear the voice from the gramophone, everyone is in a panic. Mr. Rogers drops the coffee tray and Mrs. Rogers screams loudly and then faints. Then Dr Armstrong examines her quickly with the help of Anthony Martson, Philip Lombard and Mr. Rogers. At the same time, Vera Claythorne cries out: "Who was that speaking? Where was he? It sounded-it sounded-" and General Macarthur, with his hands shaking and his shoulders sagged, splutters out: "What's going on here? What kind of a practical joke was that?" [6]. Blore is mopping his face with a handkerchief and only Mr Justice Wargrave and

Emily Brent seem comparatively unmoved. Compared with them, Lombard is rather calm. He leads others to find where the gramophone is and turns it off immediately. The fast-paced plot during the short period of time creates a tense atmosphere, griping readers totally. Agatha Christie sufficiently pictures how shocked, fearful and flustered all the characters are at that time. If these characters have never done the things like the gramophone mentions, why are they so afraid? Here Agatha Christie hints that it is because all the characters have done evil before that they are so terrified when someone comes out making indictments.

Another example is about the growing process and psychological journey of Mr. Justice Wargrave. At the end of the novel, there is a manuscript document sent to Scotland written by Wargrave himself. From the document, readers can get the whole picture of the growing process of Wargrave. When he was a child, he found that his nature was a mass of contradictions. On the one hand, he had a sadistic delight in seeing or causing death. So he killed a lot of wasps and other garden pets to satisfy himself. On the other hand, he had a strong sense of justice. He always felt strongly that fairness should prevail. As a result, he chose the law as a profession since it satisfied all his instincts. With the time passing by, he has been aware of a change within himself: he wants to commit a murder rather than to judge. In order not to violate his sense of justice, he began to collect criminals who murdered someone and escaped from law sanctions one by one, finally, he had collected ten victims. Then, he wrote them and invited them to Soldier Island and murdered all of them just like the rhyme of the ten little soldier boys. At last, he committed a suicide. By making use of the diachronic relations, Agatha Christie fully reveals the disposition of Wargrave: a cruel and contradictory man with psychopathy. She solves all the mysteries with the help of Wargrave's personal statement, making the whole plots complete and reasonable. Besides, Wargrave's standard of choosing a victim is thought-evoking: one who causes the death of others but is untouchable by the law. How to punish this kind of person? Wargrave, the representative of justice, chooses to murder them as a punishment by himself, which is kind of ironic. Should violence be met by violence and are there any other ways? Here, Agatha Christie sublimates the theme of the story by proposing this question to readers.

4 Textual Space and Its Impacts

According to Zoran, the level of textual structure is affected by three factors: the selectivity of language, the linearity of the text and the perspective structure [5]. The selectivity of language means that the different levels of expressions will create different spatial effects [5]. For the linearity of the text, the order of information will influence the space of the text [5]. The perspective structures in the text can shape different foci and produce different spatial effects [5].

4.1 Selectivity of Language

In the novel, Agatha Christie describes the rumors about Soldier Island and its true nature to varying degrees. She introduces the rumors in a detailed way, which effectively creates suspense. However, she just presents its true nature briefly. In this way, the readers can

just get a simple picture about the island. Here, Agatha Christie leaves much room for readers to imagine what the island looks like.

4.2 Linearity of the Text

Throughout the novel, Agatha Christie always puts Mr. Justice Wargrave at first in most of the scenes. For example, when Agatha Christie introduces the characters on the train at the beginning of the novel, she puts Wargrave at the foremost. Wargrave is the first who takes the initiative to have the conversation with Emily Brent when they are in the car from Oakbridge station. And after hearing the indictments from the gramophone, Wargrave is also the first one who stands out to deny all the charges. The orders in which the characters appear on the stage can demonstrate the importance of the characters in some way. There is no doubt that Agatha Christie always puts Mr. Justice Wargrave at first is because he is vital in this novel.

4.3 Perspective Structure

In the novel, there are two narrative perspectives: the omniscient perspective in the main body and the first-person perspective in the postscript.

In the main body, making use of the omniscient perspective, Agatha Christie has introduced how the story develops perfectly, providing the readers with the whole picture of the story and leaving mysteries at the same time. In the postscript, making use of the first-person perspective of Mr. Justice Wargrave, Agatha Christie lets Wargrave tell the readers the story of himself: his natures, the purpose of the murders, how he collects victims and how he carries out murders, solving all the mysteries left in the main body convincingly. In this way, with the help of the two narrative perspectives, the author Agatha Christie makes the plots complete and reasonable.

5 Conclusion

Based on Gabriel Zoran's theory of spatial narrative, it can be found that various spatial levels exist in Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*. The topographical space is constructed by the space as static entities and the spiritual space. The space as static entities mainly includes the train and Soldier Island. They are not only the places for characters' activities but also play an essential role in creating horror, shaping the dispositions of the characters and sublimating the themes. The spiritual space contains thoughts, dreams and hallucinations, reflecting different psychological changes of the characters and benefiting the mystery-creation, the development of the plot and the sublimation of the themes in the novel. The chronotopic space is constructed by synchronic relations and diachronic relations. The former presents the characters' various reactions at the same time and helps to compare the dispositions of the characters. As for the latter one, in the postscript, Mr. Justice Wargrave tells his growing process, solves all the mysteries in the main body and evokes readers' thoughts on the theme of law and punishments. The textual space is influenced by the selectivity of language, the linearity of the text and the perspective structure. In this novel, the author gives different levels of descriptions

about Soldier Island, leaving much room for readers to imagine what the island looks like. The orders of the characters appear on the stage can demonstrate the importance of the characters in some way. Two narrative perspectives: the omniscient perspective in the main body and the first-person perspective in the postscript are adopted, which helps to set and solve mysteries. In a word, these different levels of space offer new perspectives for better understanding the mystery-creation, the dispositions of the characters, the development of the plot and the sublimation of the themes in *And Then There Were None*.

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