

Analysis on the Narrative Features of Sinclair Lewis' s Novel from the Angle of Spatial Criticism

Xiaozhen Shi

Xuzhou Institute of Technology, Xuzhou, 221000, China

Keywords: Spatial criticism, Sinclair Lewis, Narrative features

Abstract. Spatial criticism theory is a kind of leading critical form in the present western countries, thinking the spatial characteristics of literary works from material space, psychological space and social space, proposed by Lefebvre. When study Sinclair Lewis' s novels, people found that his works have already implied the present leading trend of thought--"space turning", this paper divides his works into different levels from the angle of spatial criticism to discuss the narrative features of his novels.

Introduction

Sinclair Lewis is the first writer who won the Nobel Prize in Literature in American history, his works displayed America's social presence in the early 20th century through a sharp writing style. Researches on his works lasted several processes, then gradually found that there implied some spatial metaphor in his works, and found the comprehensive penetration of space factors in his novels. This paper defines the narrative space of Sinclair Lewis' s novels from the angle of spatial criticism, divides into "geographical landscape space" (material space), "individual psychological space" (psychological space), "social sexual space" (social space).

Geographical landscape space

Geography has an inseparable relation with literature, geography can provide materials and research evidence for literary creation, while literature can provide emotional materials for geography. The western scholar--Williams thought that literature can reflect the development process and patterns of rural and urban more comprehensively. Thus the significance of literature to geography lies in that it can display the process how this society presents a spatial structure. While the "geography landscape space" is also the important components of spatial criticism, it can display the external of social economical structure, also can reappear different social cultural power in the way of geography. In Sinclair Lewis' s novels, it not only can describe all kinds of geographical landscapes in languages, but also can give corresponding cultural connotation to these geographical landscapes. In his award winning work *Main Street*, Sinclair Lewis drew the outline of rural geographical landscapes in three cultural patterns, firstly, drew out the rural' s resistance to the urban culture through poetic narration, secondly, described the contest of different cultures from the angle of the contradiction between rural and urban areas, at last, displayed the real rural culture by using the narration after virus. These three rural cultural patterns reflect that the rural cultural space is not fixed, but changes constantly with the changes of history. Lewis' s drawing on geographical landscape can not only reflect the historical change of literature, but also can display the writer's emotion for these changes. In the novel *Babbitt*, Lewis focused on the description of American urban geographical landscapes, like city Zenith, Lewis displayed the geographical landscape of city Zenith through Babbitt' s encounter in three more specific and vivid cultural patterns: "silverware" "cliff" "standardized city"^[1]. Among which, standardized city is the most realistic display of the urban cultural space, is also the essence that Lewis' s construction of urban narration, it not only explained the dominant position of capitalism at that time, but also explained that capitalism, not only has the potential of "homogenization" on the historical trend, but also has the historical particular situation of "heterogeneity". Though these descriptions, Lewis explained readers that the spatial production of

capitalism has the inherent characteristics of centralization and standardization. In the novel *Dodsworth*, Lewis considered how to construct ideal American culture. From the angle of geographical landscape space, the large map of foreign metropolis in this novel can be divided into four image sets, one is the “smell” London image, one is the “visualized” Paris image, one is the “post-war social psychology” Berlin image, one is the “national subconsciousness” Venice image. The protagonist--American Dodsworth ran through the web of these four images, thus formed the comparison and inter weave of American culture and European main cultures, further arose the discussion of “Is America the center of the world?^[2]”. Explore the difference between European culture and American culture and the possibility for their integration. In this novel, the geographical landscape space is an important channel for readers to explore the novel world, also the base for readers to understand the writer’s complicated emotions.

It is obvious to make out the connection between geographical landscape and writer’s cultural emotion structure in Lewis’ s novels by using “geographical landscape space” in the spatial criticism to analyze Lewis’ s novels. Lewis used town, Zenith, Paris, London and Venice to form spatial fields, while this spatial field not only revealed modern American social characteristics, but also became the culture carrier of Lewis’ s “emotion structure”, and reflected a huge American culture space with unified tone.

Individual psychological space

Individual psychological space is the description of psychology, while in the narrative spaces of Lewis’ s novels, the interaction between the description of individual psychological space and the self-construction of figures’ subject consciousness formed an important link. Individual psychological space means the psychology place of figures in the sales, it is the distinct representational space that bears figure’s typical thoughts and emotion features, and the individual characteristics space of geographical landscapes. There is a distinct similarity among Lewis’ s novel figures, that is during the reappear process of psychological space, these figures are often placed in the situation and life pieces of facing the true self, and all these figures will back to their former life after their failure in trying to avoid the dilemma of real life. Thus Lewis’ s novels not just described the features and connotation of the geographical landscapes, but also displayed the figures’ psychological changing track. Thus in his novels, Lewis can express his own viewpoints and emotions under the double association of geographical space and figure’s psychological space. According to the researchers, ideologically, America denied sexual desire and tried to oppress it from the end of the 19th century to early 20th century. Thus during America’s transitional period, influenced by this kind of ideology, American’s key symbol logic became behavior to control their bodies, derived a complicated social structure based on the cultural symbol form. While Lewis’ s novels explored the society in this form, explored how did the controlled body influence people’s psychology by using specific spaces, explored how should Americans in the early 20th century build connections among self and the world and others, and explored self-cognition, self-establishment, self-realization^[3].

There are different features of the figure psychological space in Lewis, in *Main Street*, female Carol generated the buds of self-awareness through the collision and extrusion of urban and rural cultures; while during the process that shifting from urban to the wilds, male’s self-awareness constantly switches from unconsciousness to consciousness; in *Dodsworth*, Dodsworth’s unceasingly wander among metropolis like Paris and Venice, his psychological characters also be sealed with urban smells with the changes among different metropolis.

In the *Main Street*, Carol came with her husband to the small town from city, her exclusive self-awareness faced difficulties that happened during the process of meeting others, and the problem of how to reconstruct her subjectivity in the new environment. Carol always had the difficulty of self-identification in the rural life. Through this way, Lewis tightly connected female ego with the external society, explores and researched the split between female and ego, ego and world. In the novel, under the constant collision between rural and urban cultures, Carol felt a unique life style,

while her female awareness also changed as space changed, reconstructed self and return to “Nora” at the end.

In the novel *Babbitt*, Lewis’ s attention switched to male, he constructed the psychological changes of Babbitt from unconsciousness to consciousness through urban space, to reveal the delicate changes of Babbitt’ s psychology. Lewis described a restless and psychological imbalanced male in *Babbitt* in a subtle way, and carefully described the process of a man from psychological imbalance to seek self-liberation. The hero Babbitt shuttled constantly in different spaces, from city to the wilds, from unconsciousness to consciousness, during this process, Babbitt constantly try to find his real heart, during this process, the figure of Babbitt also trended to the unification of “self”, “the inner self”, “superego”. The novel not only displayed spaces based on Babbitt and many American social pictures, also realized the transition of spatial form from diachronic to synchronic on narration.

In *Dodsworth*, the subject was split by Lewis for exploration, and explored Dodsworth’s desire. In the novel, the hero experienced a process of seeking “desire”, while his “desire” also changed constantly in space. “Others’ desire” was Dodsworth’s desire cased on his wife when he lived in America, he has split at this time; “the construction of the symbol meaning of desire” means that when Dodsworth traveled with his wife overseas, he already had no desire, but focused on his wife’s desire; “seek his own desire”, at this time, Dodsworth had already realized the existence of his own desires and realized self return.

Social sexual space

Social sexual space means the social aspect, in the novel narration, social space is an indispensable part, because hero can only have stories and originate changes during the communication with the outer society, thus can form a work. Social space manifests stratum in the society, can produce society as well as reflect society. The macro social space can not only express the confrontation of thoughts, but also express the confrontation among different classes. From the micro aspect, social space is the gender oppression in daily life. Lewis also discussed social space in his novels, that formed the structure of the last aspect on the spatial criticism. Researches on social space also include gender’s meaning expressed on the spatial entities. Lewis’ s purpose for this exploration is to construct an ideal American society and sexual relations, thus gender has an important place in Lewis’ s social space discussion.

In the novel *Main Street*, for the logic “the mobility of females in the identification and space is the key to maintain their membership status”, he rethought Carol’s living condition, thus arose the discussion on whether females can possess multiple possible living space in the real life.^[4]

In *Babbitt*, Lewis specially paid attention to the masculinity and the gender relation. During the end of the 19th century, the transition period of America, all the American males were thinking how to be a real male. While in the novel, Babbitt had a fuzzy gender role, across gender and feeling anxious about the regulation of traditional gender, thus to doubt and rebel the masculinity defined by tradition. Through the description of the image like Babbitt, Lewis discussed the root cause for masculinity crisis. Meanwhile, through the image of Babbitt, Lewis tried to decompose the constraint of the traditional gender definition for males, implied to realize a harmonious sexual world by gender complementation.

In *Dodsworth*, for masculinity, during his narration, Lewis changed his point into construct ideal masculinity, thus the novel expressed the exploration for “masculinity”. Lewis constructed an unique gender way, to realize a kind of gender politics without rights through three methods. First is to construct male activity space from foreign lands, make gender difference exist and eliminate the established power. Second is to make males feel self-awareness crisis during traveling in foreign lands, compare all kind of masculinity and inspect. At last, construct a masculinity that gives up power and rules, chases for changes, abandons the authoritative ideal collusion after inspection.

The purpose of the exploration for Lewis’ s novels based on “social sexual space” is to understand the relationship between the American gender mechanism in the 1920s and Lewis’ s novels. Lewis always devoted to construct the ideal American society in his novels, Lewis’ s explorations can be

found from every narration of geographical landscape space. Lewis had explorations both for male and females, for example, the distinct and splitting point of public area and private area of the rural life, the masculinity that males faced in the urban society and the difference of American enterprises spirits.

Conclusion

Generally speaking, study and discuss Lewis' s novels through three angles of spatial criticism: geographical space, psychological space and social space, we find that there is not just reappearance of space in his novel, but also realized the effective combination of space philosophy and literary works. These spaces guide people's understanding on the thoughts of value, figure's psychology, social gender mechanism in Lewis' s novels, and understand the huge influence of Lewis' s novels on the American society at that time.

Acknowledgments

This paper is the scientific research project of Xuzhou Institute of Technology, the project name is *Discussion on the Travel Culture and Spatial representation of Sinclair Lewis' s Free Air and Go East, Young Man*. Project No.: XKY2013309

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