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Abstract

This essay presents a practical approach that focuses on three aspects of narrative space. The approach is exemplified with a reading of Janet Frame's "You Are Now Entering the Human Heart." This text is short and thus ideally suited for discussion in class. The reading of Frame's story demonstrates that space is crucial in situating literary meaning in specific cultural contexts.
Narrative Space and the Location of Meaning

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Abstract
This essay presents a practical approach that focuses on three aspects of narrative space. The approach is exemplified with a reading of Janet Frame’s “You Are Now Entering the Human Heart.” This text is short and thus ideally suited for discussion in class. The reading of Frame’s story demonstrates that space is crucial in situating literary meaning in specific cultural contexts.

Narrative, Time, and Space: From Theory to Analysis

When we analyze how narratives construct their literary spaces, we have to remember that, without such imaginative spaces, stories could, quite literally, not take place. However, while time has traditionally loomed large in the study of narrative—which is, after all, defined as the representation of a “succession of events” (Rimmon-Kenan 2, my emphasis)—space and place have been less frequently discussed, and they remain much more elusive analytical concepts (Bal 132). Mikhail Bakhtin was among the first who tried to make up for this deficiency. Bakhtin developed the concept of the chronotope (meaning “time-space”) as a way of conceptualizing the “interwovenness of time and space” (Keunen par. 3):

In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. (Bakhtin 84)

The concept of the chronotope does not, however, lend itself easily to a step-by-step analysis of literary space—partly, as Bart Keunen points out, because of “the minimalistic and rather fuzzy way” in which Bakhtin defines the concept (par. 3).

Nevertheless, many critics accept Bakhtin’s premise that we need to conceptualize space and time as interdependent rather than separate entities. Michel Foucault, for instance, posits that “it is not possible to disregard the fatal intersection of time with space” (22). Similarly, Yuri Lotman suggests that “culture organizes itself in the form of a special space-time and cannot exist without it” (133). [1] If narrative is by definition concerned with the succession of events and thus with time, and if time is intricately bound up with space, then it is inappropriate to analyze narratives without attending to the construction and function of space.

I suggest that we can analyze the most important functions of space in any given narrative if we attend to the following three aspects:
a) the relationship between the places depicted in a text (similarities, contrasts, borderlines);

b) the way these places are described and perceived by the narrator(s) and/or character(s);

c) the semantic value of these places within culture (i.e. independently of the specific text). [2]

If we apply this approach to Janet Frame’s “You Are Now Entering the Human Heart,” we realize that it is not simply a text about a visit to two museums in Philadelphia, but in fact a critical comment on American society. Frame’s story focuses on the discrepancy between America’s professed ideals and an everyday reality pervaded by fear, and it shows how this fear cripples people’s ability to lead a good and fulfilling life.

The First Step: Getting a Sense of the Basic Conflict(s)

Before analyzing the role of space in Frame’s (or any other) story, we need to get a sense of the main conflict(s) the text deals with. In “You Are Now Entering the Human Heart,” the central conflict is that between love and fear – and the text seems to suggest that the motivating factor in human behavior is not love, but fear. At the beginning of Frame’s story, we encounter the first-person narrator in the main hall of the Franklin Institute. The narrator considers entering an over-sized model of the human heart that is part of the museum’s exhibit. However, she decides to do this later, and to first visit the Hall of North America in the Natural Science Museum across the street. [3] There, she encounters a group of elementary school children and their elderly teacher. A museum attendant is about to demonstrate to the children that there is no need to be afraid of snakes; instead, we “have to learn to love” and protect snakes (195). In order to prove that not all snakes are dangerous, he places “a green snake about three feet long” around the teacher’s neck (194). The narrator sees that the elderly woman is terrified, and that she only controls her fear because of the children (195). However, when the snake suddenly moves, the teacher loses control, tears “the snake from her throat,” and throws it on the floor – “because she could not promise to love and preserve what she feared” (196). Her fear, in other words, is stronger than the moral imperative to “love and preserve.” At this point, the narrator, who has to catch a train to Baltimore (193), decides to leave the Natural Science Museum, realizing that there is “no time [left] to make the journey through the human heart” (196).

The Human Heart: Real and Imagined Space

This last statement is ironic, for while the literal journey through the human heart (or rather, a model of it) does not take place, the story of the teacher and the snake can be seen as a metaphorical journey through the human heart. In Western culture, the heart is considered the seat of emotions or even the soul. This image is a good example of how “[s]pace brings together the material and the abstract, the body and the mind” (Kirby 174), for the idea that emotions are seated somewhere within, i.e. located inside of us, is itself a spatial metaphor – a metaphor that pervades Frame’s text. The teacher, for instance, manages “to drag the fear
from her eyes to some place in their depths, where it lurked like a dark stain” (194). The fact
that the teacher’s fear is imagined as lurking in the “depths” of her eyes allows us to speak of
“the outbreak of her fear” (195), as if fear were an animal caged within. If there is a
metaphorical space inside of us, then we can also take a metaphorical journey through that
space. In this metaphorical sense, then, the text contradicts the narrator’s claim that the
journey through the human heart does not take place.

Clearly, however, the narrator is referring to the literal heart (or rather, the over-sized model of
it) in the Franklin Institute, and in this sense the journey through the heart really does not take
place. Still, even this literal heart has an additional meaning, for the over-sized model of a
human heart can be read as an accurate symbol for the state of the metaphorical human heart
(i.e. the human soul and thus ‘human nature’). If we accept that Frame’s story shows fear as
ultimately being stronger than love, and if we agree that this is deplorable, then the narrator’s
description of the model as “worn and dusty,” and “already [...] punished for the day,” is
highly appropriate (193). The word “punished” carries with it associations of crime, sin, and
penitence that point beyond a narrowly literal reading (‘the heart is only a model’). Instead, it
strengthens our sense that the text focuses on a moral question and examines the roots and
effects of human behavior. In Frame’s story, the model of the heart is literally sullied, and it
can be termed an appropriate symbol because the same is true for human nature, which is
governed by fear rather than love.

However, while the model of the human heart can be read as an appropriate symbol, the text
also signals that, as a literal model, it is inadequate because a scientific approach to the
mysteries of the human heart is bound to fail. In the Franklin Institute, a museum concerned
with human civilization from the point of view of technological and scientific progress, the
heart only occupies “one corner of the large exhibition hall” (Frame 193); the heart is, quite
literally, relegated to the margins. According to this reading, the model may be a scientifically
accurate representation of the biological heart. However, in sharp contrast to the art of
storytelling, it cannot show what is human about the human heart. There are, in other words,
two readings of the model that are somewhat at odds with each other. According to the first
reading, the model shows quite adequately what a dirty place the human heart is – but
according to the second reading, the model is at the same time unable to reveal the truth about
the human heart. The symbol of the dirty heart is thus much more ambivalent than it may
seem at first sight.

Museums: Contrasting Spaces and Their Functions

Interestingly, there is a similarly ambivalent aspect to the two museums that appear in
Frame’s short story. On the one hand, one could say that the Franklin Institute stands for
human technology and thus civilization, whereas the Natural Science Museum is devoted to
nature; the two museums would then symbolize the conflict between civilization and nature.
The fact that the elderly teacher (obviously human) is confronted with a snake (i.e. nature)
and fails to control her fear (i.e. to act in a civilized manner) would seem to support such an
interpretation, since this loss of civilized behavior occurs in the Natural Science museum (i.e.
in the space of nature).
On the other hand, however, the Franklin Institute and the National Science Museum cannot simply be seen as binary opposites because, as museums, they are both products of culture. Moreover, while each museum focuses on a different subject (one on human technology, the other on nature), they have the same cultural function: the accumulation and dissemination of knowledge. The schoolchildren are in the museum because the aim is to get “them young and teach […] them” that snakes should be protected rather than killed (194). Museums, in other words, are part of the education system – which, in turn, according to the French left-wing critic Louis Althusser, belongs to the Ideological State Apparatuses. Ideological State Apparatuses are part of the private rather than the public sector, and they are thus distinct from the Repressive State Apparatuses, such as the army or the police, which are under direct control of those in power (13-14). For Althusser, Ideological State Apparatuses are contested and even contradictory sites (15-16) but ultimately embody and reinforce the ideology of the ruling class (17). Even if we do not agree with Althusser’s conclusion that Ideological State Apparatuses, including museums, mainly serve to uphold the ideology (and thus the dominance) of the ruling class, it is difficult to deny that ideology and power are involved. Museums not only describe the world, but also select what is worth describing and thus implicitly devalue what is not on display. Museums are sites of ideological struggles situated in a specific cultural space.

Philadelphia: Locating Meaning in American Culture

Accordingly, we must now take a step out of the Franklin Institute and the Natural Science Museum into the specific cultural space in which they are situated. This step helps us realize that “You Are Now Entering the Human Heart” is far from fatalistically deploring the fact that the human heart is invariably dirty because it will always choose the path of fear rather than love. Instead, the story reveals that a specific societal order can create the conditions in which human behavior will tend to be driven by fear. Frame’s story is set in Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love, founded in 1682 by William Penn as part of his “Holy Experiment” in popular government and Christian living (Soderlund 85-88); it is, of course, also the city in which the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution were signed. However, this city of ideals, this symbol of the belief in a better tomorrow, is described in the story as a dangerous place where the elderly teacher has reason to be “afraid to answer the door and to walk after dark and carry her pocketbook in the street” (195). What was supposed to become the city of brotherly love, in other words, has turned into a place pervaded by fear. The story’s point is not that fear wins over love as a motivating factor in human behavior in any given situation but that it does so in a situation where people live in constant fear. The elderly teacher already has enough to “think about without learning to handle and love the snakes” (195). The snake – a symbol of evil in Christian culture – thus easily becomes a focal point for her accumulated fears. Admittedly, we cannot be certain that the teacher would have managed to control her fear in a society that was not suffering from constant dread. However, the story suggests that, at the very least, her chances of controlling her fear would have been much better.

Conclusion: Spaces of Meaning, Meaningful Space

To analyze the construction and function of literary spaces, then, is not merely an interesting
supplement to more important aspects of narrative analysis. As “You Are Now Entering the Human Heart” illustrates, we may miss entire layers of meaning if we fail to attend to the question of space. We have seen that the spatial positioning of the model of a human heart within the Franklin Institute may indicate the marginalized position of the human heart in a technocratic society. Similarly, the contrasts between the Franklin Institute and the Natural Science Museum, but also their shared function as museums within culture, highlight the complex relationship between civilization and nature, as well as that between knowledge, value, and power. The culturally significant setting of the story, finally, the city of Philadelphia, links these more general moral conflicts to a particular historical moment and the problems of a particular – though far from homogeneous – cultural space: the United States of America. [4]

Many Americans believe that the United States should be “as a citty [sic] upon a hill” (Winthrop 47) – a model of freedom, equality, and justice for all. However, the America of Frame’s story is not living up to its ideals. Fear has become all-pervasive, potentially paralyzing people’s ability to love. At the same time, however, the text does not depict the predominance of fear over love as an eternal and unchanging aspect of human nature. Frame’s story is, therefore, not fatalistic. It does not insinuate that fear is always stronger than love and that the snake will always lead us towards evil. Instead, the story analyzes how crucially our actions are shaped by the society (i.e. the space-time) in which we live, and that even our emotions – which we tend to locate deep inside of us – are shaped by the cultural space that surrounds us. If fear is the general currency of the day, love will become much harder to find. This is not what one would call an optimistic assessment of American society, but it is much less gloomy than a reading according to which there is no room for change at all. And without a detailed analysis of the literary spaces in Janet Frame’s story, we would not have been able to locate this meaning. [5]

Notes
I would like to thank Sarah Chevalier for bringing Frame’s story to my attention as well as for proof-reading this article. Also, I am indebted to Simone Heller-Andrist for her detailed feedback.
[1] Even individual words can be used to illustrate the notion that time and space are interdependent. The word within, for instance, can have both spatial and temporal meaning.
[2] Points a) and b) correspond to Mieke Bal’s distinction between place and space, respectively: place “refers to the topological position in which the actors are situated and in which the events take place” and thus “the physical, mathematically measurable shape of spatial dimensions,” whereas space describes “places […] linked to certain points of perception” (133).
[3] The text does not specify the narrator’s gender. For stylistic reasons, I use the female pronoun rather than the gender-neutral it.
[4] Foucault maintains that, in general, the external “space in which we live […] is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space” (23).
[5] Advanced students may be interested in Bhabha’s discussion of cultural spaces and boundaries in the context of postcolonial theory.

References


