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A Study of Survival Predicaments in Graham Swift's *Waterland* from the Perspective of Spatial Theory

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In *Waterland*, contemporary British writer Graham Swift tells the protagonist Tom, using a mix of reality and history recreates the ecological devastation of the Fens Marsh, the fall of the Atkinson family and the spiritual collapse of the people. This paper attempts to explore the dilemma of human existence by starting from Henry's spatial theory and dividing it into physical space, social space and mental space.

Keywords: Waterland, physical space, social space, mental space, survival predicament

Introduction

Graham Swift and *Waterland*

Graham Swift is a distinguished contemporary British novelist who is adept at unearthing the extraordinary in the midst of the ordinary. The protagonists of his novels are often ordinary middle-aged people and through depicting the fate of his fictional characters, Graham reflects on the life and times of modern society, expressing his thoughts on issues such as history, life, love, marriage and death. *Waterland*, Graham's third full-length novel, was nominated for the Booker Prize upon publication. It is this novel that establishes Swift's place in British and world literature.

Waterland tells the story of Tom, a history teacher forced into early retirement, in the face of his students' question about history, leaves behind the grand narrative of history to tell his own living personal history—how his own present crisis is rooted in his adolescent experiences, his family history, the vicissitudes of the Fens and indeed the whole of human history and how a man can be seized by time and made a prisoner of history. The Guardian praises *Waterland* for its perfect control, elegant writing and first-rate narrative; Time Out finds it a meditation on the vernacular comparable to Wessex by Hardy and London by Dickens.

Literature Review

Through abundant resources from databases such as Google Scholar, Ebsco ASP and Sci-Hub, many essays about *Waterland* are available. Foreign scholars mainly focus on the perspectives of historiographic metafiction, Eco-criticism and feminism.

Due to the historical nature of *Waterland*, most critics analyse it from a historical perspective, such as Lea and Malcolm. In Lea's *Graham Swift* and Malcolm's *Understanding Graham Swift*, they both consider that

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Waterland breaks down the boundaries between traditional literature and historiography from a postmodern perspective, reflecting on the progressive view of history as represented by grand narratives.

In terms of Eco-criticism, Ronald H. Mckinney analyses the relationship between nature and history in *Waterland* from an ecological perspective and asserts that there exists a "growing convergence possible for the postmodern and environmental movements" (Mckinney, 1997, p. 20). Bracke also asserts that *Waterland* can be regarded as not only a postmodem fiction, but also a fiction about Eco-criticism, and that *Waterland* emphasizes the natural landscape as well as story-telling.

In addition, critics have also studied the female identity in *Waterland*. For instance, Katrina M. Powell analyses the portrayal of women in the novel from a feminist perspective and believes that Swift "privileges the male act of story telling" (Powell, 2003, p. 22).

According to CNKI, domestic studies on *Waterland* are similar to those abroad, focusing mainly on historiographic metafiction, Eco-criticism and narrative strategies.

Historiograph in *Waterland* is still a hot topic in domestic studies. Wang Yanping believes that *Waterland* presents a chaotic world, and in this novel Swift suggests that humans need to resist the "nothingness" (Wang, 2015, p. 113) through historical narrative. Two years later, in Wang Yanping's another essay, she reinterprets *Waterland* from a Neo-historical perspective, arguing that this novel implies that the significance of storytelling lies not in the truth of the reference but in the positive effect of the narrative act itself—"helping people to overcome their sense of nothingness and find meaning in life" (Wang, 2015, p. 110).

In addition to historiography, domestic scholars are also very interested in Eco-criticism in *Waterland.* Wang Yanbo analyses the confrontation between man and nature and "the rise and fall of the family business empire" (Wang, 2021, p. 86) from an ecological perspective. Wu Qiusheng and Weili find the feminist ideas implicit in *Waterland* from an ecological perspective and argue that "Graham Swift's ingenuity in *Waterland* is enhanced by tragic fate caused by the archetypal character of Thomas Atkinson" (Wu & Wei, 2018, p. 39).

Domestic scholars have also analyzed *Waterland* in terms of various narrative strategies. For instance, Jinja reexamines the Graham's response to the plurality of contemporary historical and cultural contexts in his work from an "intertextual perspective" (Jin, 2004, p. 122), focusing his study on the relationship between the Earth and other individual texts.

All in all, scholars at home and abroad have studied *Waterland* mainly from the perspectives of historiography, Eco-criticism, feminism and narrative strategies.

Spatial Theory

Since the 20th century, spatial criticism has become a popular topic of academic research. With the gradual emergence of spatial criticism in various fields, such as geography, art, literature and so on, some scholars have established their own spatial theory. The early founders of spatial theory include Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault and Henry Lefebvre. This paper aims to divide space into physical, social and mental space according to Lefebvre's spatial theory.

Survival Predicament in Physical Space

According to Lefebvre, the physical space is the real existing natural space, the place where the characters move around. In *Waterland*, Graham recalls at length the destruction of the Fens by man from the 17th century

onwards—the digging of the river, the construction of the drainage channel and so on. Man's wanton destruction of nature has also been met with nature's backlash. The tragedy of the confrontation between man and nature is a profound reminder of the importance of respect for nature.

The Devastation of the Fens

Situated on the border between water and land, city and countryside, the Fens is an isolated paradise. Tom (the protagonist as well as the narrator of story) regards it as a "fairy-tale place" (Swift, 1992, p. 8), where "the land, so regular, so prostrate, so tamed and cultivated, would transform itself, in my five- or six-year-old mind, into an empty wilderness" (Swift, 1992, p. 8).

However, as technology progressed, people destroys it for profit. In the mid-17th century, the pragmatic and forward-looking Dutch came to the Fens under the leadership of Cornelius Vermuyden, where they dug rivers and built dykes. However, instead of speeding up the flow of water, the excavation of the new channel slowed it down and "a divided river conducts at any one point a decreased volume of water, and the less water a river conducts the less not only its velocity but also its capacity to scour its channel" (Swift, 1992, p. 15). In the 1790s, dozens of feet of cracks broke in the banks of the Bedford River. In 1713, the Denver Lock collapsed and the heavy silt pushed the river backwards onto the land. Thousands of acres of farmland were flooded and villagers had to wade to their beds. Unfortunately, short-term profit clouded the minds of people who ignored nature's resistance and rejection and, with ever-advancing modern technology, endlessly plundered the natural resources of the Fens to meet their own expanding needs.

After the first results of the transformation of the wetlands, the only criterion for judging the merits of the natural environment is whether it is conducive to commercial values. For economic reasons, the Atkinson family's ancestors embark on a frenzy of natural transformation—the construction of drainage channels. William Atkinson tells his son that the key to Thomas's Creek was the "drainage canal". He shows his son a map and points out that building a malt mill at Kesling would bring wealth to the family. Thomas takes his father's advice to heart and begins to purchase the wetlands along the River Lyme. After Thomas's painstaking reclamation and disregard for the laws of nature, by the year of the "Battle of Trafalgar" Thomas has drained twelve thousand acre-feet of water along the River Lyme and built over twenty dykes.

Nature's Counter-Attack

In *Waterland*, the Fens, a symbol of pristine nature, is both powerfully creative and incredibly destructive. Soon, nature's revenge comes. The Atkinsons drains their fields and has workers build a large number of locks and dams in the depression. All this backfires and greatly upsets the previous balance of nature. The opposite was true, leading to several outbreaks of flooding. For the first time, in the winter of 1815 and 1816, the rains caused the River Leam to swell, overwhelming the embankment from Appleton to Hawkwell and flooding more than six thousand acres of recently cultivated land. For the second time, in the flood of October 1874, 11,000 acres of land were left uncultivated for a year. Twenty-nine people were drowned and eight were lost. The damage caused by the water to houses, highways, bridges, railways, drainage channels and pumps cannot be accurately estimated. The heavy rains caused the River Leam to show unbridled contempt for the banks that confine it. The gates of the Atkinson sluice gates were swept open. The water rushed through the front door of Thomas Atkinson's former home. After the flood, the Atkinson family's tale became inferior due to the flooding and the brewery's profits

dwindled. The ultimate cause of the Atkinson family's downfall is their disregard for the laws of nature and their insane destruction of it.

Survival Predicament in Social Space

Lefebvre regards social space as a formal presence, a container for social relations. In *Waterland*, the Atkinson family attempts to be the creators of the history of human progress by expanding their business territory, but behind the rise in commercial value is the destruction of the environment, the oppression of working people and moral degradation, all which lead to the stage for the Atkinson family's downfall in the end.

The Business Ambitions of the Atkinsons

The Atkinson family first establishes themselves in the business world and accumulates a great deal of wealth. The first vision of the Atkinson family ancestors is to own their own farm, so they start a barley farming business by enclosing land. After the initial idea comes to fruition, they begin to think about setting up their own malt factory and even a brewery. The family's ambitions grow and Thomas Atkinson reaches his peak, He begins buying bog land at bargain prices, draining it and selling it for ten times the original price. Having accumulated a large amount of capital through the resale of his land, he sets about dredging the River Lyme and developing water navigation, thus paving the way for the later overseas expansion of the beer market. Driven by the industrial revolution in Britain at the time, the Atkinson family's brewing business works wonders in overseas markets. They quickly adapt to the technological changes brought about by the Industrial Revolution and begin using steam rather than wind pumps. In addition, they are initially concerned that the use of "monstrous" (Swift, 1992, p. 3) trains would interfere with water transport, but soon takes advantage of the convenience of rail transport to further expand their market. However, not content with the excitement of their expanding fortune, the Atkinsons also wants to be recorded in the history books. The Atkinsons therefore extend their influence into the political arena. Thomas first becomes chairman of the Lyme Drainage Board. After his death, his two sons become mayors of the town. It seems to have been an unwritten rule that the Atkinsons always enjoy the privilege of holding this office.

The Shattering of the Business Landscape of the Atkinsons

At the height of the Atkinson family's status, a series of bizarre event shatter the myth of Atkinson's family. Firstly, Sarah's tragedy is a blow to the Atkinson family's progressive narrative. Secondly, the bizarre story of Tom's grandfather Ernest betrays the family's progressive ideals. He is considered the family's "first rebel without expansionist ambitions" (Swift, 1992, p. 157). In politics he consistently advocates conservative policies and accuses his father of promoting imperialist expansionist aspirations. It is not clear whether Ernest is really an alternative to the family, or whether he has to be scrupulous because of the economic downturn in Britain at the time. But there is a event that indeed illustrates the demise of the Atkinson family's myth of ultimate growth. To celebrate the coronation of George V, Ernest Atkinson produces "Coronation Ale" (Swift, 1992, p. 170), which is free for the whole town to enjoy as a way of easing tensions between him and the rest of the town's inhabitants. Unfortunately, the brewery is destroyed in a fire that night when almost everyone is drunk. The blaze is again the subject of much debate: the incompetent firefighters are instead encouraged and cheered by the crowd. At midnight, "the symbolic chimney of the distillery came down to the applause of the crowd" (Swift, 1992, p. 175).

The truth about the fire is also a matter of opinion. The only thing we can be sure of is that the Atkinson family's "progressive ideals" goes up in smoke when the distillery burns down.

Not only ignoring nature's warnings and continually exploiting the working people at the bottom, therefore, the ultimate imperial myth-busting of the Atkinsons seems destined.

Survival Predicament in Mental Space

Lefebvre believes that mental space is an abstract concept that does not exist in physical form, but is a combination of mental activity, perception, sensation and other subjective factors that exist within the reader's understanding of a literary work. In *Waterland*, behind the broken ring of material civilization is the collapse of the world of the spirit: Thomas suspects his wife's infidelity; Ernest Atkinson's incest with his daughter; Mary's crime of baby stealing and Tom's forced resignation.

Ernest Atkinson's Incest with His Daughter

Unlike the rest of the Atkinsons, Ernest has a "scant interest in his future prospect as head of the Atkinson Brewery and the Atkinson Water Transport Company" (Swift, 1992, p. 180). However, it is such a seemingly incompetent heir who sees "as no Atkinson had clearly seen for four generations the essential desolation of the Fens. Affected perhaps by the watery circumstances of his birth, he wished that he might return to the former days of the untamed swamps, when all was yet to be done, when something was still to be made from nothing" (Swift, 1992. p. 109). But the truth is that he does not as he wishes, because he remembers the spirit of the Atkinsons. So what is there for him to do but continue the family business? What makes Ernest even more depressed is the public pointing at his personal brew. Of course, what followed are a series of events that make Ernest' heart saddened to the core: "the continuing fall in the Brewery profits; the succumbing of his wife, Rachel, my grandmother, to a severe asthmatic complaint for which the damp atmosphere of the Fens may have been partly to blame, and her subsequent early death in April, 1908" (Swift, 1992, p. 110). At this point, Ernest is in a mental quandary—he is in love with her daughter and asks her to give him a child.

Also in mental distress is Helen. Due to the early death of his mother, "indeed she adored her poor father and pitied his sorrows, and having been his close and only companion since she was a child, how should she know what was natural and what wasn't?" (Swift, 1992, p. 154).

When Ernest asks Helen to bear him a child, "she would think: the truth of it is, I'm trapped. My life's stopped too" (Swift, 1992. p. 154). It is clear that Helen's love for her father is not that of a woman for a man. For her mother's early death, her father was her only support, so to speak, and Helen hopes the missing motherly love in him. And Helen agrees to her father's request because she does not want to break his heart.

Both Ernest and Helen are in serious mental distress, a distress that even leads to incest. Ernest's ambitions are not fulfilled, he does not want to follow in Atkinson's footsteps, and he does not approve of the family's means of extracting profit. He has in his heart a respect for nature and a yearning for a life of ordinary pleasures. But he could not do as he pleased, for he is the heir to the Atkinson family. Unhappiness in his career and the loss of his wife step by step lead him to see his daughter as a saviour, and not only that, he asks her to create another saviour for himself. And what of the wretched daughter, who not only lacks her mother's love, but even her father's love has turned sour. Struggling between keeping her father out of harm's way and

pursuing true love, she eventually comes up with a compromise—pretending to bear his child. However, fate is not kind to this bitter Helen, and she gives birth to a child with her father, Dick, a fool.

Mary's Crime of Baby Stealing and Tom's Forced Resignation

Tom's wife, Mary, is a "marginal voice" in the novel that cannot be ignored. Twice she closes herself off. The first time is after an unwed miscarriage. When she learns that she has lost her ability to bear children, she locks herself away for three years in order to repent to God. When Tom returns from the army, he finds that Mary seems stronger than he is. After the marriage, Mary deliberately chooses to work in a nursing home as a way of showing that she could live without children. But under the pressure of the accelerating pace of life, Mary, unable to face the future and at the same time unable to return to the tragic past, choose to retreat a second time, praying to God for salvation. She takes a baby from the grocery shop, thinking it is from God. When Tom forcibly returns the child, Mary is completely devastated.

Not only does Mary suffer from mental distress, but Tom, the narrator of the story, is also trapped in mental distress. Tom is perhaps the only person in the novel who knows anything about the Cricks and the Atkinsons. His wife committing baby theft due to insanity affects his work and makes him have to resign. In addition, Tom is distressed by the disregard for history, which is questioned more than once by mischievous students in the classroom, and even the headmaster is ready to merge history and general studies classes. As a history teacher with a wealth of knowledge and a unique perspective on history, this is a serious blow. How could he teach history to the next generation? How is he to inform the next generation of the importance of history?

Conclusion

In *Waterland*, Swift juxtaposes the family story with national history, the literary world with the real world, exploring the ecological crisis in Britain, the ups and downs of the Atkinsons, and the spiritual trauma suffered by Sarah, Helen and Mary in a constant flashback of memory. Swift uses the mouth of the protagonist Tom to ask the most important question of all: what is wrong with the human world besides?

In terms of physical space, the Fens has been reclaimed and is no longer the paradise it once is, and the over-exploited nature has brought untold misery to the people. The capitalists are blinded by profit, and the working people of the lower classes have no choice but to be the executioners of the capitalists in order to survive. In the end they all suffer the punishment of nature. In terms of social space, the Atkinsons, with their ancestral business acumen, continue to expand their business territory. The destruction of the social fabric behind it combined with the trauma of the aftermath of the Second World War leads the protagonist Tom, the narrator of the story, to believe that mankind will never learn its lessons and that history will repeat itself, a pessimism that is taken to the extreme by his student Price. In terms of mental space, all have been damaged in varying degrees. This damage stems from the ethical confusion brought about by the chronology of the family social structure.

In conclusion, the history constructed by Swift is relevant for thinking about the various predicaments and possible problems that people face in the present.

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