

Original Paper

Beyond Love Tragedy: A Study on Urban Emotional Alienation in *Early Autumn* from the Perspective of Spatial Theory

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Abstract

Early Autumn, a realistic short story by the African-American writer Langston Hughes, depicts a story of a chance encounter between two former lovers on the streets of New York, only to separate again. As a classic literary work, it vividly portrays the alienation experienced by urban dwellers. Current scholarly analyses of it predominantly focus on three dimensions: characterization, the theme of tragic love, and minimalist narrative style. The streets, stations, the Square park, and other elements in the story are merely regarded as the supporting background and simple environmental description of narrative time and space, and yet insufficient attention has been paid to explore the influence of the multi-narrative space in the novel on characterization and the evolution of intimate relationships. Based on the perspective of Lefebvre's spatial theory, this paper focuses on the novel's diverse narrative spaces to explore how Hughes's depiction constructs the alienated narrative atmosphere. Also, it tries to explain how the metropolitan environment erodes intimate bonds between individuals. Furthermore, beyond the surface of romantic tragedy, the study reveals the reality of the lonely existence of modern urban souls.

Keywords

spatial theory, Early Autumn, narrative spaces, Langston Hughes, emotional alienation

1. Introduction

Langston Hughes is an outstanding modern African-American writer and a leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance. As Ellmann and O'Clair (1998) argue, he is the first poet to incorporate the essential musical qualities of the blues—Black folk wisdom, the realism of suffering, and a simple artistic form—into poetic creation. Since its publication, *Early Autumn*, a classic realist short story in his literary career, has been widely incorporated into university curricula on short story appreciation and African American literature in China, the United States, and elsewhere. Unlike many of his other works,

particularly his poetry, which frequently engages with themes such as Black cultural identity and the aesthetics of jazz, this story places the narrative focus on the private emotional regrets of ordinary men and women. Rather than centering on racial struggle, it offers a finely textured depiction of everyday life in New York City, thereby contributing to more nuanced representations of urban emotions within African American literature.

In terms of form, *Early Autumn* is brief and structured around a seemingly straightforward plot; however, it is more than just a story. *Early Autumn* focuses on the encounter of two former lovers in the streets of New York after several years of separation and their hasty separation again. Although the details of the plot may seem quite simple and unremarkable, Hughes employs the technique of the arrangement of urban public spaces, such as streets and Washington Square, to convey the feelings of alienation, which is typical of modern urban society. This kind of alienation, which is conveyed through the author's restrained and concise style of writing, is capable of breaking up intimate relations between ordinary people. Despite all the artistic features of the story, it used to be considered merely a romantic tragedy. Over time, its distinctive artistic qualities, particularly its use of spatial arrangement to produce emotional experiences and to structure meaning, were widely overlooked.

Based on the above analysis, this paper discusses this work from the perspective of Lefebvre's spatial theory and attempts to probe into the art of space narrative in *Early Autumn* from three aspects, which are physical space, psychological space, and social space. Contrary to previous researches which have discussed the characters or theme of love, this paper discusses Hughes's manipulation of concrete physical spaces like streets and Square and how it makes the characters recognize their spatial awareness and creates the tempo of their action; how public space affects psychological experience in the interaction process, leading to hesitation, inhibition and estrangement in emotions; how the norms and discipline of social space affect the boundary and direction of the intimate relationship between the protagonists.

2. Literature Review

For a considerable time, scholars have conducted extensive discussions on Hughes's poetry (Culp, pp. 240-245; Smith, pp. 49; Chasar, pp. 57-81; Waldron, pp. 140-149), with more attention to the identity dilemmas of the Black Americans, the spirit of struggle against racial discrimination, and the aesthetics of jazz in his works such as *The Weary Blues* and *The Negro Speaks of Rivers* (Orun, pp. 199-214; Smethurst, pp. 49-70; Chinitz, pp. 60-78). In contrast, less attention falls on his essays, novels, dramas, and so on.

Nevertheless, scholarly debates on *Early Autumn* persist regarding three dimensions, including characterization and feminism, the theme of tragic love, and narrative techniques. In the dimension of female characters and feminist criticism, as one of the protagonists in the story, Mary's behavior reflects that urban women are passive in relationships during the 20th century (Hu, 2013). At the same time, as a male writer, Hughes inevitably carries a male-centered narrative stance in his writing. Thus,

the marginalization and derogation of Mary in conversation with Bill will inevitably entail the loss of women's voice (Zhu, 2008). Under such ideas, some research has examined the origin of Mary's tragedy from both historical context and personal choices, while also exploring the realistic enlightenment that can be learned from this case for the awakening of modern-day women (Zhang, 2016). In the dimension of tragic love, the existing research emphasizes the broken love story of protagonists through different theories in an effort to form a comprehensive interpretation of the topic. With the concise writing style, Hughes extends the helplessness of individuals' destiny in their tragic love, which is usually affected by the environment of the era (Wang & Bai, 2019). Some other researchers utilize Halliday's register theory in analyzing the linguistic differences among the dialogues of the characters, thus verifying the tragic truth of the completely broken love between Mary and Bill (Zhou, 2015). On the dimension of narrative techniques and strategies, there are some researchers who explore the overall narrative rhythm of the novel, claiming that the compressed and simple structure of time and space is an important tool to depict the modern interpersonal estrangement (Wang, 2026). Through classical narratology, Bai (2007) claims that Hughes simplifies narration and focuses on the narrative center of a male protagonist, leading to a natural male-centered narrative prejudice, which echoes the above research. In conclusion, existing research has thoroughly analyzed the female characters, tragic love, and narrative techniques of the story in diverse aspects like feminism, linguistics, classical narratology, and so on. However, research on narrative space, which is one of the chief vehicles of narration, has not been conducted effectively. Besides, they are regarded only as tools for setting up the emotional tone of this story and providing temporal and spatial context. In addition, insufficient attention has been devoted to the psychological function of narrative space for characters as well as the narrative functions of urban public spaces. How urban spaces operate as catalysts that disrupt intimate relationships and produce emotional alienation remains insufficiently explored.

Research on spatial narratology began during the late 20th century. Joseph Frank, an American scholar, was one of the earliest researchers to undertake systematic studies of spatial narratology. In his *Spatial Form in Modern Literature*, he comes up with concepts such as "spatial juxtaposition" and "reflexive reference." Additionally, he suggested that spatial narration must consider three aspects: spatial form of the language, physical space of the story, and mental space of the reader. His work inspired other researchers to apply the study of spatial narratology to various disciplines such as psychology and sociology. Gaston Bachelard further expanded the study of spatial narratology from the point of view of phenomenology and psychology, whereby he investigated the meaning of spatial elements with regard to the emotional state of the characters. It is widely acknowledged that the contributions of Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault marked the spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences (Zhang, pp. 7-8). Among them, Lefebvre showed the interrelationships between physical, psychological, and social aspects of space. He argues that physical spaces refer to the spaces in which the story is narrated and the plot is developed. Social spaces refer to the spaces where social activities and social organizations take place; they refer to the spaces where the rights and cultures clash with each other;

they also refer to the spaces perceived by the social groups. These social spaces are capable of reflecting the values, preferences, and objectives of social groups. Mental spaces refer to the perceptions and cognition of people when their outer experiences of living life become reflected in their inner hearts. They are powerful tools with which the character understands the external world as well as himself. Furthermore, Foucault also analyzed the social power hidden within different spaces, thus perfecting the study of spaces from a sociopolitical perspective. Moreover, Mikhail Bakhtin came up with the concept of “chronotope”, which dialectically combines time and space in narrative and bridges a theoretical gap about spatial-temporal relations. Under the influence of all these international scholars, many Chinese scholars have also started analyzing spatial narratives. Among these scholars, Long Diyong has stood out in particular through his systematic discussion of three dimensions of spatial analysis in the realm of narrative studies: the connections between spaces, spatial issues as they appear in narration, and the spatial form. Furthermore, he enriched the application of Space-Representation and stressed the significance of space in characterization, contributing to the theoretical progress of spatial narratology. To recapitulate, focusing on narrative spaces, spatial narratology can be understood as a theory with the spatial order as its structure and spatial logic as its rule. Various scholars from different disciplines have discussed this in terms of various narrative forms, studied the construction of textual space and its narrative function, and thus gradually formed a relatively comprehensive research framework. Spatial narratology has brought about renewed vitality to traditional narratology in terms of new theoretical methods for creative practice and new critical perspectives of literary works.

3. Physical Space: The Bustling Crowds in Washington Square

Physical space is the first level in Lefebvre’s spatial theory. In the real world, it primarily refers to objectively existing and tangible locations that can be perceived by people. In literary texts, it corresponds to the geographical settings in which narration unfolds. Lefebvre (1991) argues that spaces are neither a passive geographical support nor a neutral backdrop for social activities; rather, they are media through which social relations are continually reproduced. Accordingly, environmental features, human movement, boundaries, and spatial order in spaces all shape characters’ experiences, constrain their actions, and reveal latent distances and conflicts among them. In *Early Autumn*, Washington Square and the bustling, flowing crowd within it typically constitute the story’s central physical space. Not only do the urban public settings provide the place where the male and female protagonists meet, but they also actively intervene in the unfolding of Bill and Mary’s bittersweet reunion. The tangible geographical environment and the continuous movement of passers-by regulate the tempo and manner of their dialogue, thereby foreshadowing the emotional rupture between them—an estrangement that remains difficult to bridge. Located in the southern area of Central Park in New York is Washington Square, which is the place where the former lovers Bill and Mary meet each other. Hughes does not just make up a setting; he picks a real spot: Washington Square Park, particularly enhancing the reliability

of narration. Furthermore, Washington Square is not just any place, which is a famous landmark packed with people every day in New York. Most of them are strangers to each other, just faces in the crowd. However, out of all those strangers, Bill and Mary run into each other. For readers, it is a little surprising, a little magical—it adds the extra touch of romance to their story.

Hughes also carefully renders the protagonists' position within the crowd: "The bus started. People came between them outside, people crossing the street, people they didn't know. Space and people" (Hughes, 1950, as cited in Yu, 2010, p. 8). In this depiction, chance encounters and emotional bonds alike appear to be, in part, a matter of fate. Although Mary and Bill had fortunately met and developed a relationship before, "something not very important" (Hughes, 1950, as cited in Yu, 2010, p. 7) completely changed them, turning them into virtually strangers. The bustling crowds and noisy surroundings of Washington Square suggest that this encounter is less a reunion than a continuation of their separation. The whole short story is characterized by the minimalistic style of Hughes, which smoothly and naturally reflects the movement of people and atmosphere of the square: "A great many people went past them through the park. People they didn't know. It was late afternoon. Nearly sunset. Cold" (Hughes, 1950, cited in Yu, 2010, p. 7). The busy and noisy urban environment and the constant flow of passers-by create a barrier to their conversation by restricting the small space for communication. The words "sunset" and "cold" not only denote the time and the weather condition of the day, but also denote the growing emotional distance between the characters. Sunset necessarily implies the end of their tender past love, while the cold means the fading of their patience and love. Thus, these details clearly demonstrate that their romance has gone forever and that there is nearly no chance to restore it anymore. The bustling external environment echoes the characters' inner awkwardness, silence, and estrangement. Objectively speaking, there is always the presence of a constant crowd of strangers for the two former lovers within the public area, so that an intimate emotion can hardly be established between them. Hence, their dialogue is made hurried and fragmented: "I am a lawyer. Nice firm, way downtown. Married yet? Sure. Two kids. We have three children. I work in the bursar's office at Columbia" (Hughes, 1950 as cited in Yu, 2010, p. 8). Bill and Mary have a slim chance to get into a calm and quiet environment to talk about something, and the subjects of conversation are restricted only to small talk of work and family affairs. Clearly, Bill and Mary can only conduct a polite and formal dialogue, unable to directly express their true feelings (Bai, 2007).

Along with the bustling crowds, Washington Square bears the role of both the narrative device and the metaphoric one, serving to represent the widespread estrangement and alienation characteristic of modern life. Consequently, "the space in the text is no longer a static 'container,' but rather a referential system with multidimensional cultural information, a metaphor" (Wu, 2010, pp.103-107). The very presence of the bustling crowds, the noises around, and interpersonal barriers serve to illustrate the emotional state between Bill and Mary at the current stage. Hence, the sense of distance produced by the external environment reveals the estrangement existing between Bill and Mary. In this way, the alienating nature of urban public space prevented this encounter from repairing the broken love

between Bill and Mary. As a result, the barriers hidden in the physical space contribute to the development of the inner worlds of the characters and lead to the emergence of the psychological space founded on the subjective experience of the individuals. Thus, the bustling crowds and Washington Square not only shape the protagonists' immediate interactions but also render subsequent psychological and social spaces more intricate, filled with seemingly insurmountable barriers and a pervasive sense of melancholy.

4. Psychological Space: Deep Estrangement in *Bleak Autumn*

Research in literature is inseparable from an exploration of human spiritual life. Even within the framework of spatial narrative, characters' inner psychological experiences remain an indispensable dimension that should not be neglected. As Lefebvre (1991) argues, psychological space is not a mere reflection of objective conditions; rather, it is a mental structure that gradually comes into being through interaction with the external world. In this view, the construction of psychological space both extends from the form of physical space and is also shaped by human behavior, language, and other mediating factors, thereby contributing to a broader mode of existence (Xie, 2016). From this perspective, psychological activities in literary works do not occur in isolation. They are closely tied to some particular elements: characters form emotions, memories, and affections in spaces, and through these processes construct their own inner worlds. Accordingly, analyzing spaces in *Early Autumn* cannot be confined to physical spaces alone. It is equally necessary to examine how characters generate distinct psychological experiences within the same physical or social spaces, and how these experiences, in turn, shape interpersonal relations and contribute to the development of the story's theme.

"Under the trees in Washington Square, she found herself desperately reaching back into the past (Hughes, 1950, as cited in Yu, 2010, pp. 8)". In Washington Square, Mary is surrounded by the bleak early-autumn scenery and the subdued stillness of the public space, which prompts her to draw on memories of the past almost involuntarily. Yet this act of recollection fails to awaken anything in Bill: it does not call forth shared memories, nor does it elicit any response to Mary's present tenderness. Mary firmly holds on to the love that has already gone, but Bill is already past it and deliberately keeps himself detached from that period. However, with every passing day, more distance builds up physically as well as mentally between them: "She is no longer young. Bill, however, remains young (Hughes, 1950, as cited in Yu, 2010, p. 8)." Slowly and gradually, the indifference and coldness of Bill make Mary realize that the irreversible element of the world is not any location but time and its effects on people. Through the emotional gap between Bill and Mary, Hughes highlights the irreparable alienation inherent in modern urban life, where past emotions will never be able to bridge the gap; lovers who were once close live in separate worlds that can hardly connect with each other. Finally, through the use of light and shadows: "The lights on the avenue blurred, twinkled, blurred (Hughes, 1950, as cited in Yu, 2010, p. 8)", Hughes uses the depressing atmosphere of autumn to highlight the

sorrow and regret Mary feels about the relationship, suggesting the eventual end, which means that they will still eventually part even if the two meet again (Wang, 2026). The characterization in such a manner prevents protagonists from becoming flat characters and is consistent with the unique setting and rhythm of the story.

As a matter of fact, the external barriers created by physical space and the inner barriers created by psychological space are both produced through urban social structure, class hierarchy, and codes of ethics and of conduct. Indeed, as Lefebvre stresses, in spatial theory, physical space creates the material base, psychological space creates the inner reflection of this material base, and ultimately, everything converges to the concept of social space. Therefore, it would be wrong to say that the identity gap and different life paths of Bill and Mary are merely determined by their personalities and individual choices.

5. Social Space: Lonely Souls in the City

According to Lefebvre, social space functions as a place where social actions take place and social institutions find their expression. Also, it becomes the place of intersection and clashes of various social ideas and conventions, which are constantly perceived and used by social groups. Therefore, it is possible to observe the ways of existence, moral orientations, and patterns of interpersonal communication in the spaces. “Essentially, space is produced by human activities. It is not a materialized, static structure that has been assumed since the Enlightenment; it is an open, contradictory, dynamic process full of conflicts”, states Wiegner (2006, p.181). In a contemporary urban environment, city public spaces generate many social orders that constantly influence relations between people and create the circumstances under which traditional kinds of intimacy become impossible to maintain. As a key writer in the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes mostly concentrates on the simple lives of ordinary citizens in his works. Despite the fact that *Early Autumn* was written after the movement’s heyday, it continues the tradition of being grounded in urban reality.

As a public space accessible to all citizens, various fragmented and temporary social activities take place in it. People can either pause there for a short time or pass by quickly. Although they find themselves in the same physical space, they have great difficulty in developing stable relations. With a lack of possibilities for private interactions, people who are present in such public places have to adhere to the invisible rules of urban life and behave properly by maintaining proper social distance. The set of rules acts as a psychological constraint, which restricts the free expression of feelings. Naturally, when former lovers, who now almost become strangers to each other, accidentally meet in the crowds, the public environment always makes them maintain the appropriate distance. Hence, their communication is reduced to formal and superficial conversations, leaving the regret and longing hidden at the bottom of Mary’s heart unsaid. In such a way, the barriers created by the social space nearly prevent any kind of communication from occurring, making it impossible to repair the love that has already been broken. As a result of population mobility caused by the fast-paced modern urban

environment, some different types of social interaction which are different from before are formed. Unlike the stable and settled agrarian life of people before urbanization, people's contacts nowadays become temporary and practical. However, the establishment of long-lasting intimate relationships requires stable contact in nearby while urban mobility prevents such establishment. Thus, it creates obstacles for the development of emotional bonds between individuals. Thus, the hurried pedestrians walking past each other without any true sense of connection represent the life of most modern urban dwellers. Even though they are surrounded by the same physical surroundings, they are walking through life on separate paths and cannot easily create any spiritual resonance between themselves. That means the love tragedy of the protagonists is not a consequence of their own choice only; on the contrary, it is a natural phenomenon objectively caused by the urban social environment which shapes the structure of communication and hampers the establishment of intimate relationships.

The streetlights imagery in Hughes's story further deepens the connotations of social space by functioning as a symbol of the loneliness of individuals coexisting within the same urban environment. In public streets, streetlights typically illuminate passers-by; yet in the public realm, they remain visibly separate—unable to form a genuine connection with one another. As Hughes writes, "The lights on the avenue blurred, twinkled, blurred" (Hughes, 1950, as cited in Yu, 2010, p. 8). The flashing lights indicate that Mary has accepted the fact that life must go on despite Bill's absence. However, the repetition of "blurred" and "twinkled" indicates her internal conflict and grief, which conveys Mary's mental condition in which she fails to get relief. Accordingly, the flickering effect highlights the vulnerability of their relationship: it is just a matter of time before they part ways. But Mary hesitates to leave, and her eyes are filled with tears of resentment and regret. Reading throughout the narration as a whole, readers can find that environmental descriptions are not only a reflection of the bleakness and sadness of the autumn season, but also the fluctuating mood of the protagonists' bitterness and hopelessness. In general, the description is a mirror of the existential dilemma faced by the modern urban society. While there are many individuals and countless opportunities for meeting, it is hard to find a person with whom you can have an honest and sincere love. The social space, thus, can hardly hold any lasting intimate relationship. Urban residents generally have a defensive attitude towards interpersonal communication. Therefore, Loneliness is the predominant state of people's lives. Naturally, the chance encounter between Mary and Bill comes to an abrupt end. After their separation, they return to their separate lives, prepared to sever nearly all emotional ties to the past: "Space and people. She lost sight of Bill" (Hughes, 1950, as cited in Yu, 2010, p. 8). This ending confirms that the urban spaces in the story provide little fertile ground for nurturing intimate emotional bonds. Through urban routines, the unwritten norms governing public interaction, and the inherently mobile lifestyle of city people, the possibility of sustained deep relationships is gradually and continually undermined.

6. Conclusion

The spaces and images used by Hughes are more than representational elements because they create

interpretative meanings that relate to the process of experiencing a world through physical perception, affective experience, and socially prescribed ways of interacting with others. It is precisely through Washington Square as the focal place of interaction of personal actions with the urban public world that Hughes makes visible the spatial levels described, and that help to understand the emotional gap existing between the two people and how the urban environment affects interpersonal relations. Given the analysis above, this story is related to themes like emotional alienation in urbanization, emotional barriers created by a world of strangers, and the transitoriness and futility of interpersonal encounters. Despite its simplicity, this story can be regarded as one rich in narrative spaces. Narrative spaces not only serve as the setting and organizing principle for the development of plot but also as a narrative element that helps to develop characters, events, and themes of the story. Hence, the narrative spaces carry multiple significances, such as the social, historical, cultural, aesthetic, and even ethical aspects. As the physical, psychological, and social spaces are all included in the narration, the sharp contrast between bustling crowds and solitary souls and the close correspondence between the bleak autumn setting and the protagonists' emotional estrangement, altogether convey the author's thoughts on the lives of common people in a modern city. At the same time, the multilayered structure of the narrative spaces, which includes the objectively existing urban landscape, the intangible emotional barriers, and the evolving social environment, provokes readers' deep reflection and strikes a balance between social critique and aesthetic experience.

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