Space for Love: the Triangle Spatial Relationships in Alan Ayckbourn's "Things We Do for Love"

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Introduction

Alan Ayckbourn is a prolific playwright who creates more than 70 works. Without too much dramatic climax, he uses the most usual and common episodes to represent out daily life. The usual events, however, ironically unveil people's alienation and adrift when encountering their life. Besides, Ayckbourn's stage is often separated into several sections that in his plays the spatial movement is frequent. He uses stage as a representation of our daily space. For example, fragmental episodes in *Private Fears in Public Places* explain city people's alienation and eagerness for care and love. The characters move in the flowing scenes, being disclosed their fear and distrust of others. Another example is *House & Garden* in which the theater is divided into two stages, showing two plays simultaneously. The two stages represent our two living places: house and garden. The same crew, being the roles of the same family in the two plays, has to move from one stage to another when it is necessary. The audience can only watch one of the plays one time without knowing what happens on the other side/place. By arranging different places on stage, Ayckbourn's stage is like a real living place that indicates people's social relationship.

This paper aims to discuss Ayckbourn's *Things We Do for Love* by employing Henri Lefebvre's concept of space, trying to clarify the denotation of building in this play. This building is divided into three flats in which the first floor can be seen completely while the other two sections, the basement and the second floor, are only seen by their half part. This building is the characters' living place as well as the place of producing their social relationships. Lefebvre's triad space points out that our space has not only practical usages but also symbolic meanings related to its history and people's social relationships. It will discuss whether the building is the place for love or the place implying power relationships.

Henri Lefebvre's Triad space

Relationship between subjectivity and space is reciprocal. Some critics think that space does not appear after the social activities. Instead, it exists and endows meanings to social interactions. Jeffrey Malpas points out that place is "not funded *on* subjectivity, but is rather that *on which* subjectivity is founded. Thus one does not first have a subject that apprehends certain features of the world in terms of the idea of place; instead, the structure of subjectivity is given in and through the structure of place" (35).

Space creates significations and is also presented by social interactions. Henri Lefebvre emphasizes that space is a production from the development of capitalism. Everyday life, according to Henri Lefebvre, is comprised by "the logic of the commodity, where life is lived according to the rhythm of capital" (Highmore 113). The rapid transformation of economic activities alters the landscape of space. Production activity is "defined by the incessant to-and-fro between temporality (succession, concatenation) and spatiality (simultaneity, synchronicity)" (*Production* 71). Space is where a person lives, interacts, and communicates with other people. In the process of establishing relationship with people, he/she gives meanings to the place. When space is defined by human beings' various social activities and political system, it influences what people do in it. Lefebvre thus defines space as a triad space that he thinks space should be viewed in both practical usage and symbolic meaning. The three concepts are spatial practice, representations of space, and representational space (*Production* 38-39).

Spatial practice, the perceived space, refers to how space is deciphered by daily life and routines. Spatial practice denotes the establishment of social relationships. It is a place produced by different activities in which explain how people use and perceive the space. People's work, leisure time, and social activities explain their practice in the space.

Representations of space is planned and arranged by professionals. It is a conceived space where professionals such as the dominant class or architects deploy and carry out their ideas. In other words, it is the practice of the professionals' conception of the space. The structure and outlook of urban space, for instance, forming with the development of capitalism, is designed by planners, urbanists, and intellectuals dominated by the authority. This conceived space insinuates power struggle in it, depending on how the dominated class represents the place.

Representational space, "directly lived through its associated images and symbols," is lived space (Lefebvre, *Production* 39). The description and imagination of the space is produced by non-verbal systems and signs. For example, a place is a symbol of religion through rituals and festivals. To Lefebvre, festival, a moment of the rhythmic movement, is referred as reconfiguration of daily life. By festival, the routine in life is able to be disturbed and thus its counteraction is disclosed. In the moment of pleasure, differences are established and subversive power is revealed. Space is thus represented by effervescence in which everyday life becomes more transparent because it is a moment "when existence is public through and through" (Blanchot 12).

To Lefebvre, the critique of everyday life derives from the crack produced in the moment of pleasure.

By employing Lefebvre's theory on triad space and everyday life, the following is a discussion of *Things We Do for Love* in which the space is divided into three parts. In each moment of the characters' life, many episodes are scattered and rebound together so that we can see the particularity and relevance among them.

Space for Love and for Flowing Desire

In *Things We Do for Love*, a Victorian terrace house owned by Barbara is redecorated and divided into a three flats: the rental basement for Gilbert, a postman and a widower, Barbara's room on the first floor, and the rental flat for Nikki and Hamish on the second floor. Nikki is Barbara's best friend at high school Nikki and her fiancé, Hamish, rent the flat temporarily when they are waiting for their house being decorated. The full view of the basement and the second floor cannot be seen by the audience. Only the upper part of the basement and the lower part of the second floor can be seen. When anything happens in the two places, we can only see the characters' feet moving on the second floor or the roof of the basement. Barbara's room, the first floor, is the only one place that show the full view which we can see the characters' complete movement and expression.

Given that the house in this play is a Victorian terrace house, it is a living place with its history. It is named and related to the reign of Queen Victoria whose era is the age of Industrial Revolution and population growth. As the society moved to the nineteenth century, the production of buildings is increased due to the advanced technology and transportation. Victorian architecture, leading by new innovation and technology, features new building materials and crafts. In UK, Victorian style house designates a wide range of architectural styles, from Classicism to Gothic style.

Terrace house is the most common resident place. It is, since Georgian period, for most people's living place:

> Georgian London was a city made up almost entirely of these long narrow plots with their tall narrow houses and long narrow gardens or courts. Practically the whole population lived in one version or another of such houses. A handful of aristocrats had their isolated palaces; and the unemployable and criminal classes had their centuries-old rookeries; but the remainder, from earls to artisans, had their narrow slices of building,

> now called, for no very good reason, 'terrace-houses'. (Summerson 65)

Fox also points out that in comparison with European countries such as France, Italy and Germany, only 15% buildings in England are apartments built in 1990 (111). Terrace house is sometimes connected with working class.[1] It is a place that the middle class choose as the residence.

The structure of a terrace house is usually divided into several parts. In Georgian period, terrace house has its garden or court. It also has a basement which is only a "shallow excavation" (Sumerson 65).

In this play, the three flats, originally an "early Victorian terrace house" (1), reveal their different atmospheres and meaning. It is seemingly that when the space of the ancient house is re-arranged, it implies the re-presentation and re-imagination of the living place. Paul Allen points out that people's living style in this play implies the transformation about people's choice of residence:

> The play also recognizes a social transition that had taken place in Ayckbourn's lifetime, namely the shift from a society in which the vast majority of people lived within a family unit to one substantially composed of people living on their own, either from choice or by force of circumstance. (*Pocket* 177-178)

Barbara inherited this house from her father and separated it into three levels. The first floor, where most of the plots occur, is her living room. She rents out the basement to Gilbert and the second floor to Hamish and Nikki who need a temporary place to stay. In Act I, we can find that Barbara is a fastidious person who demands her living place as cleanliness and tidy. Everything should be put in its right location according to Barbara. Even the function of each piece of furniture is strictly regulated by her, such as the "ornamental chair" (59):

> Hamish: Yes, I feel this place is your centre. You must feel very centred here.
> *(He goes to sit on the upright chair.)*
> Barbara (*sharply*): No, not there if you don't mind.
> *Hamish jumps up*
> I'm afraid that won't take any sort of weight. Sorry.
> Nikki *(puzzled*): What's it there for, then?
> Barbara: Well, not for sitting on.

[1] On working-class housing see J. Burnett's *A Social History of Housing 1815-1985*, Methuen, 1986, E. Gauldie's *Cruel Habitations: a history of working class housing 1780-1918*, Allen and Unwin, 1978, and William Logan's *The Gentrification of inner Melbourne - a political geography of inner city housing*. University of Queensland Press, 1985.

> Nikki: But it's a chair.
> Barbara: Yes it's a chair for — putting things on.
> Nikki: That's silly. (15)

The room is only for her; even when she and Hamish have their first sex relation, to avoid Nikki, they move to the second floor where Nikki and Hamish temporarily reside. Barbara demands everything in her house in order; she cannot bear anything that is disorganized or dysfunctional. The impression of her place should be "of order and cleanliness" (1). Her room is a "tasteful feminine, male-free, child-free zone; a room with small-scale, fastidiously selected furnishings chosen to suit its fastidious single owner" (1). The activity in this space is restricted; the arrangement in this space by Barbara has decided what people do. The space is "produced before being read"; it is to be lived by people in particular context (Lefebvre 143). Everything should be managed and turned by her into tidiness, even herself, "a small, neat woman of about forty; precise, organized, contentedly living alone in an ordered, if slightly antiseptic, domain of her own creation" (2). Gilbert calls her as a "living saint" (49). Demanding from life, Barbara is critical both to herself and others. She thinks everything should be paid back when a person makes efforts on it. For example, she holds a welcoming dinner party for Nikki and Hamish. She feels upset when Hamish and Gilbert are late because she is ready for everything and even cook vegetarian meal for Hamish's eating habit:

> Barbara: I mean, here you, you've dressed up, you've made an effort. I've dressed up. I've made the effort. I've made this wretched vegetable casserole which will be quite revolting because I had to use aubergines instead of leeks—and where are they . . . ? (28)

She is self-centered. As Hamish compliments her dress, she directly criticizes: "I wish I could say the same about your tie" (30). She also expresses her dislike for Hamish's dressing style for he has "a ghastly clothes sense, an awful schoolboy sense of humour" (51).

She cannot tolerate imperfection and defect in her house. When she sees dirtiness, she despairs of people who make the mess (3). The defect, she thinks, comes from her father who did not manage the house well when Gilbert, her tenant, reports there only one pipe system that many cause block: "Don't blame me. Blame my father . . . He put it in . . ." (3). Barbara's father has financial problems so that he cannot add more pipe for the house. Succeeded from her father's house, she works hard to keep it clean and perfect. However, in the beginning of the play, the pipe system and dirty shower tray seem to predict the imperfection of the characters' life.

Barbara's room is also like a public place for people's interaction although everything in this space has to follow her rules. Every party or public talking in this play takes place in it. She invites others for dinner and even lends her bathroom to Nikki.

Nikki, Barbara's high school's best friend, is moving onto the second floor with her fiancé, Hamish, waiting for the decoration of their new house. The second floor can only be seen the half part from the knee level, with basic furnished: a bed and a dresser. With only one pipe system, the shower cannot function. However, Nikki and Hamish will move out whenever their new house is finished. This small room is only their temporary staying place. In this play, Nikki and Hamish never eat or cook on this floor, but in Barbara's. This room is for their rest and intimate interaction. Compared with Barbara, Nikki cannot keep place clean. She admires Barbara's well-managed place:

> Nikki: I'm not! I love it. I'm terribly jealous, Barbs. Mind you, I could never keep the place as tidy as this. I never could. It would be total chaos in ten minutes. (7)

Lack of self-confidence, Nikki looks weaker and less vitality. She needs someone who is stronger to take care of her. Barbara is her idol in her high school life. She thinks that Hamish rescues her from violence and maltreatment of her ex-lover.

When passion flows among the three places, the spatial code is going to be altered. That is, the way of reading space transforms as emotions shift. The hidden parts of the second floor and the basement imply invisible desire that cannot be divulged. The emotions in this room are veiled, obscure, and inarticulate. Barbara and Hamish start their affair on the second floor, instead of her own room. Gilbert's admiration for Barbara is vented throughout the secretly nudity on the ceiling of the basement and his clothes collection of Barbara whom thought he was going to donate them to some charity organization. Barbara's room, in Act One, is not allowed to be disturbed, no room for man (7). She chooses her own life style and claims that she does not like any "heavy relationship" (10). Even in the beginning of Act Two, Hamish confesses that he falls in love with her and intends to break up with Nikki, Barbara refuses:

> Barbara: Look, go away, Hamish. Go back to nice, simple, uncomplicated Nikki. I'm a cantankerous, bad-tempered old woman. Just go away. (51)

Barbara thinks herself spiky (51) that no one can get close to her. She is a jellyfish (52) that stings and protect herself from people who change her life order. However, this "extremely beautiful" jellyfish is like vital attraction that draws the two. Barbara releases herself and gets deeply involved into the triangle love relationship. In Act

Two, the first floor is no more a female place. With Barbara's loose of her internal desire, her room opens for other people into her life. The hidden desire from other half visible flats flows into this open and public room.

The emancipation of desire does not solve the complicated problem for the characters. The disclosure of desire reveals the characters' embarrassment and dilemma. In Act Two, scene one, when Hamish and Barbara cannot help but have sexual intercourse again, Nikki, coming back from work, hears sounds from Barbara. By knocking Barbara's door, Nikki tries to show her care for Barbara:

> Nikki (*tentatively*): Barbara . . . Barbs . . .
>
> *Finally Nikki rings the doorbell. The noises from the bedroom stop abruptly.*
>
> *Barbara's head and naked shoulder emerge tentatively.*
>
> Barbara (*cautiously*): Hallo? Who is it?
>
> Nikki: It's only me, Barbs. It's Nikki.
>
> Hamish (*off, from the bedroom*): Oh, shit . . .
>
> *Barbara goes back into the bedroom.*
>
> Barbara: All right. Don't panic. Don't panic.
>
> Hamish (*off*): Oh, my God . . .
>
> Barbara (*off*): Don't panic.
>
> Barbara appears again.
>
> (*Loudly*) Just a second. I'm on the phone.
>
> Nikki: Right.
>
> Hamish (*off*): Oh, my God . . .
>
> *Barbara goes back into the bedroom.*
>
> Barbara (*fiercely*): Hamish! Pull yourself together, for goodness' sake! Get dressed and stay in here.
>
> *Barbara comes out, half-clothed. Simultaneously, whilst throwing Hamish his clothes, she struggles into her dressing-gown.*
>
> (*Angrily, as she does so*) I was perfectly fine before all this happened, I was perfectly happy, you bastard . . . (*She is more or less presentable, if hardly her normal immaculate self, as she opens her front door*) Nikki! Hallo . . . (53).

Barbara, though being Nikki's best friend at school life, has to lie. She is, however, calmer that Hamish who is totally panic and does not know what to do. Though entangled in love triangle, Barbara keeps herself "presentable", not allowing the order of her life violated. The appearance of her and her life should be kept as normal. She tries to take this problem as one of her daily works at office. Discussing with Hamish

about which day should be suitable to confess to Nikki, she takes the control of decision:

> Barbara: No, of course not. But I have to be on hand. In case. We'll have to make it Thursday. I'm free as a bird Thursday evening. If you're planning to go to a football match then cancel it. Thursday 20th. Seven o'clock. Write it in. "Tell Nikki." (55)

She not only asks Hamish to cancel his schedule but requires him to take note of it, like one of her daily routines. This superficial detachment is destroyed when Hamish keeps saying "I love you" to her. Alone by herself in the room after Hamish is back to his place, Barbara somewhat shows her internal feeling about her love:

> Barbara: Now what? (*She answers.*) Hallo? . . . . I said go away, Hamish! (*She slams down the phone. She picks up the cushion from the floor and hugs it to her. She laughs a little. Realizing what she is doing*) Oh God, what's happening to me? (*Going into the bedroom*) What on earth's happening to me? (56)

Love relationships cannot be dilated in a logic or reasonable way. Barbara thought it perfect as she chooses to be alone while she cannot predict what will happen when she is involved within love.

New metaphorical meaning of space is produced as emotion shifts. The triangle love alters Barbara as well as the order and function in her room. Barbara invites Nikki and Hamish to her place in order to confess everything. When Nikki and Hamish are seated, Barbara finds that the "ornamental" chair is the only one where she can sit:

> Barbara: Oh, what's that? Here we are. (*She gives sherry to Nikki and Hamish. She then takes her own glass and, finding there is only a choice of sitting next to Nikki, opts for the small "ornamental" chair in the corner*)
> Nikki: Thank you. No, I was looking for something in one of the pacing cases which they've delivered to the house and I cam acr— (*noticing Barbara*) — what are you doing?
> Barbara: Sorry?
> Nikki: Why on earth are you sitting there?
> Barbara: I — I — just thought the chair needed — using. I mean, it's silly. It just — sits here, doesn't it? Hamish was absolutely right. Carry on — you were saying? (59-60)

The chair is no more a decoration; it is back to its typical function, that is, for sitting. To conceal anxiety and sense of guilty, Barbara cannot insist on her rule of the house. Her room has been turned into a place that emancipates her love for Hamish. The social relationship of this space is changed and thus produced a new atmosphere for

this space.

The desire in the basement where Gilbert lives is much more vague and opaque than the other space of this building. Traditionally, basement is a place for facilities of a house, such as electric system, heater, furnace, and water distribution system. With mechanic equipments and less vitality, it is darker and damper than other parts of a house. Located at the underground level of a house, it is even related to death and hopelessness. The desire in this space is more obscure and clogged. In this play, Gilbert, a widower, thinks his life as "an empty space" (33) when his wife died. He turns his admiration secretly toward Barbara but the latter refuses him. He helps her fix some broken facilities whenever there is a problem. However, Gilbert makes up excuses to collect her clothes that he would donate them to charities. He makes a mural of Barbara's nudity on the ceiling in the basement. He even dresses himself up in Barbara's clothes after he knows the affair between Hamish and Barbara:

> *Downstairs, Gilbert's door opens and Gilbert emerges. He is crawling and in some pan. He has broken his leg in the fall.*
> Gilbert (*trying to crawl upstairs*): Help . . . help, someone . . . (*He falls by Barbara's door and scrabbles on it like a dog*)
> Barbara (*hearing this*): What's that?
> Gilbert: . . . help me . . . please . . . help . . .
> Hamish: It's Gilbert!
> *Hamish gets to his feet and totters to the door. He opens it. Barbara, still in some pain, follows.*
> (*Seeing him*) Gilbert?
> Gilbert: 'Morning, Hamish. 'Morning, Barbara. I'm very sorry to trouble you, but I think I've broken my leg.
> Barbara: Why is he wearing my Nicole Farhi? (72)

All his non-verbal and silent desire takes place in the half hidden basement. Even when he tries to call for help of his broken leg, he is unable to make himself into Barbara's room. He fell down from his painting on the ceiling in the gloomy basement and fails from love. At the end, Gilbert can only go back to the basement, indulging in his illusions.

Not only the characters' relationships are broken up but also each space in this house is dissolved. After the revelation of Barbara and Hamish's affair, Nikki goes back to the upstairs and starts to pack her things. She furthermore tears down everything belongs to Hamish as well as Barbara. When she is destroying Hamish's clothes, the furniture is also ruined. The history of this Victorian house is diminished:

Barbara (surveying the room): Oh, no!
Hamish (a pace behind her): Oh, God. My suits!
Barbara: Look at this bed!
Hamish: She's trashed every one of my sodding suits!
Barbara: What has she done to this chair?
Hamish: Look at this! She's even cut the feet off my socks.
Barbara: How could she do this? How could anyone do this?
Hamish: Oh, hell, Leave it. New Life, new wardrobe. (He starts to leave) Oh, God . . .
Barbara: It's all right for you. What about my chair? It was a Victorian nursing chair. It was priceless. Oh, it's so spiteful. (69)

At the same time, Gilbert starts to rip off the painting paper on the ceiling, causing damage to the house. Also, Barbara's handmade shelf in her room collapses as she fights with Hamish for Barbara struggles with her sense of guilty and thinks selfishness as the cause of their misery and unhappiness. The house has been dismembered and its value is now of no price when the original love relationship is compromised. The old time can not be turned back. The place is not the same as before since Nikki decides to break up with Hamish. In the final scene, Barbara and Hamish cannot help but embrace to each other. It is a hug with "a loving mixture of pain and pleasure" (77), that we doubt if the two characters will be happy in the future. Order and virtue that was in the house are now diminished because the structure of the space as well as the characters' relationships is re-deployed.

Conclusion

Space is a kind of figure of speech; it is a metaphor that explains people's style of living and their attitudes toward their interactions with others. Space is able to be interpreted both "physically as with animals' use of smells or human groups' use of visual or auditory indicators" and "abstractly, by means of discourse, by means of signs" (Lefebvre 141). Space exists when people give it meaning. Space alters people's activity and behavior when it is endowed with different interpretations.

Alan Ayckbourn reveals the real emotion and humanity in his plays. It is self-centeredness and cruelty that brings about misfortune to people. In different spatial movements on the stage, we can see the characters' inner emotions and thoughts. Their embarrassments become a trap, blocking their life and personal interrelationships. The three flats are resided by three kinds of people who establish their own discourses that violate the original historical meaning given to this house.

This tragic-like comedy is a reflection of friendship, love, and everyday life in the modern time. It is a play with tragic theme and "a rueful comic zest".[2] In the bitter and sweet ending, it probably hurts our expectation for ideal love but redeems the imperfection in life. John Peter comments the play as "both bruising and healing".[3] With both domestic violence and comedic ending, it is a play that describes "the start and finish of relationships" (Allen, *Grinning* 295) in the house that has been divided into different rooms, implying the transformation of people's relationships as well as the style and structure of residence.

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[2] See Michael Billington's review in *Guardian*, 5 March 1998.
[3] See John Peter's review in *Sunday Times*, 4 May 1997.

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