

# On Michael K's Identity Construction in *Life and Times of Michael K* from Perspective of Lefebvre's Space Theory

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## Abstract

By analyzing the multi-dimensional space in *Life and Times of Michael K* from Lefebvre's space theory, that is, social space, physical space and mental space, this thesis explores identity construction of Michael K. It contends that Michael K's identity develops from being oppressed and confined to the final awakening. Through the portrayal of Michael K, Coetzee sheds light on the predicament of the underclass in an alienated world against the backdrop of war and apartheid in South Africa, inspiring those facing oppression to find a positive life direction through free choice and action.

## Keywords

Michael K, Social Space, Physical Space, Mental Space

## 1. Introduction

*Life and Times of Michael K* (1983) is written by J.M. Coetzee, which won the Booker Prize, set in a desolate South Africa after the outbreak of civil war, telling the story of a humble man's life in the midst of the war, the army, and apartheid, and desires for an uninhibited, stable and quiet life. Coetzee excels in portraying the marginalized silent other, and shares an important position in the South African literature. Through the portrayal of Michael K, Coetzee sheds light on the predicament of the underclass in an alienated world against the backdrop of war and apartheid in South Africa. It could be seen that different places and locations were depicted in the process of the protagonist's escape. This thesis aims to discover the spatial descriptions' function to the construction of protagonist's identity. Meanwhile, the realistic guiding significance of the work will be excavated. The thesis consists of an introduction, a main body of five parts and a

conclusion. The introduction briefly introduces Coetzee, the novel, and the structure of the thesis. The main body includes five parts. The first part is literature review, examining the previous studies on *Life and Times of Michael K* and finding the research gap. Part two involves the theory applied, that is Lefebvre's space theory. Part three to part five explore respectively Michael K's oppression in social space, confinement in physical space and awakening in physical space. Finally, this paper draws a conclusion that construction of Michael K sheds light on the plight of the underclass in an alienated world against the backdrop of war and apartheid in South Africa, inspiring those facing oppression to find a positive life direction through free choice and action.

## 2. Literature Review

*Life and Times of Michael K* has attracted much attention at home and abroad, but there still leaves a broad research space for the belated scholars.

Scholars abroad conduct researches on *Life and Times of Michael K* in terms of themes, involved values and narrative skills. Future for the oppressed silent others and ambiguity exists in the novel are two hot themes mainly discussed. As for the future of the oppressed silent others, [Kehinde \(2010\)](#) argues that black people can break out of racial and social hierarchies just like Michael K and they should be empowered to achieve political stability and economic independence in Africa. [Keramatfar and Bavakhani \(2019\)](#) also are positive to the future of the oppressed and suggest that the oppressed have to reject the culture of dependence and the parasitic subjectivity in order to undermine the structure of domination. "Garden" is an important image which symbolizes the life orientation of the oppressed. [Mitchell \(1998\)](#) maintains that persons are freed to become fully human in nurturing community with others in the garden. A similar idea is expressed by [Rita Barnard \(2012\)](#), when he analyzes figure of Michael K, he points out that garden is a Utopian vision: a dream of rural life without patriarchal or colonial domination. Ambiguity is another theme discussed. [Marais \(2001\)](#) notices a fundamental ambiguity exists which points out the ethical importance of literature. Conversely, [Monson \(2003\)](#) asserts that the paradox of representation cannot be read simply as the final word on the novel's ethics. Multiple values involved in the novel are explored by scholars. For example, [Chesney \(2007\)](#) explores the constitutive gap between any given politics and individual ethical responsibility. [Vital \(2008\)](#) illustrates the ecological thinking embedded in the novel. [Sheehan \(2023\)](#) analyzes institutional manifestations of humanism. Interestingly, [Wittenberg \(2016\)](#), different from others, focuses on the narrative skill of the novel, and consider Coetzee's own attempt to recast the novel as a film, a project which resulted in an incomplete screenplay version.

In China, studies on *Life and Times of Michael K* also cover the above three aspects, however, the focusing points are different. Silence and evasion are two major themes explored by [Miao \(2008\)](#), [Yin \(2011\)](#) and [Yang and Feng \(2011\)](#). Ethics ([Qin & Feng, 2022](#)) and ecological thinking ([Wang, 2011b](#)) are the values mainly discussed. Particularly, [Li \(2022\)](#) reveals Coetzee's ecological ethics

thoughts for building a harmonious and symbiotic natural Community. When it comes to narrative skill, scholars in China analyze it from a different angle. [Feng \(2010\)](#) holds that the novel combines multiple narrative perspectives which give the novel a special aesthetic effect. Similarly, [Wang \(2011a\)](#) notices the multiple narrative strategies used and further reveals its role in presenting Michael's spiritual plight. Uniquely, scholars in China examine the spatial narration in *Life and Times of Michael K*. With the assistance of Zoran's spatial narrative theory, [Zhang \(2018\)](#) and [Cai and Lu \(2018\)](#) elaborates similarly on the spatial narrative strategies and representational meaning of space.

However, few researches have conducted from Lefebvre's Space Theory, and the novel is rich in spatial transformation and description which changes from the confined physical space to the oppressed social space and also the protagonist's mental awareness. Therefore, this research aims to address this gap by analyzing the identity construction of Michael K from Lefebvre's three spaces.

### 3. Lefebvre's Space Theory

Following Michael K's escape, the novel constantly switches the narrative space. Thus, with the assistance of Lefebvre's space theory, this paper analyzes the multi-dimensional spaces, and explores how these three spaces shaped the identity of Michael K. [Cao \(2020\)](#) points out that from the 19th century until the middle of the 20th century, the way of thinking was dominated by time, which regarded space as a "container". Until the second half of the 20th century, a new spatial theory emerged, resulting the "space turn" in theoretical level. That space turn also arose in literature research and attracted extensive attention. In the traditional study of literary works, time is a key clue of narration, such as stream-of-consciousness, time juxtaposition and so on. Though time and space are two important dimensions in traditional literary works, space is regarded as a kind of fixed and static container. Joseph Frank is the first person who claims the issue of "spatial form" in literary works in *Spatial Form in Modern Literature*. After the space turn, space is no longer a static container, liberating space from the constraints of geography.

Lefebvre is one of the leading representatives of "space turn", a famous French philosopher and an important founder of regional sociology and urban sociology. In 1974, the French edition of *The Production of Space* written by Lefebvre was published, which was later introduced to the English-speaking world by Harvey and others. In this book, he pioneers the concept of "social space". Lefebvre comments that space is "in everywhere and in every guise: enclosed, described, projected, dreamed of, and speculated about" ([Lefebvre, 1991: p. 15](#)). He breaks the traditional binary division of space into social space, physical space and mental space.

#### 3.1. Physical Space

In Lefebvre's view, physical space is the space of material. It is the physical space

where the story develops and human beings and things exist in. “It (physical space) is still the background of the picture; as a decor, and more than decor” (Lefebvre, 1991: p. 30). Lefebvre pointed out: “space is an embodiment of meaning, not empty. The world, cities and houses all have centers, which are the embodiment of space” (Lefebvre, 1991: p. 154). Physical space would affect the behavior of the character, and the experience of the character in it will affect the choice and living condition of the person.

### 3.2. Social Space

In Lefebvre’s view, the concept of social space more reflects the social attribute of space. Social space is “an effective means of control, of dominance and of power” (Lefebvre, 1991: p. 26). “Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled ideologies” (Lefebvre & Enders, 1976: p. 31). It means that space is not the background of a novel anymore, but something permeates and functions in a society. Lefebvre points out that “the area where ideology and knowledge are barely distinguishable is subsumed under the broader notion of representation, which thus supplants the concept of ideology and becomes a serviceable (operational) tool for the analysis of spaces” (Lefebvre, 1991: p. 45). Lefebvre further distinguishes between two elements that coexist in one social space, namely, “representation of space” and “representational space”, suggesting that the former refers to “the dominant space in any society” and the latter “the dominated space” (Lefebvre, 1991: p. 39). Therefore, “the representation of space tended to dominate and subordinate a representational space” in one social space (Lefebvre, 1991: p. 40).

### 3.3. Mental Space

Lefebvre thinks mental space is “tied to the relations of production and to the ‘order’ which those relations impose, and hence to knowledge, to signs, to codes, and to ‘frontal’ relations” (Lefebvre, 1991: p. 33). Mental space is mainly reflected by the social experience and psychological state of the characters.

Through his ingenious spatial narrative strategies and imagery choices, Coetzee constructs a picture of South African society for his readers, and the following section examines Coetzee’s construction of Michael K’s identity through the three spaces of Lefebvre.

## 4. Oppression in Social Space

According to Lefebvre (1991), the representation of space tended to dominate and subordinate a representational space in one social space. In *Life and Times of Michael K*, the representation of space points to the war and the apartheid in South Africa society and the representational space directs at identity of Michael K. With the confrontation in these two spaces, Michael K’s representational space develops from being disciplined to anti-discipline. In this chapter, the representation of space will be mainly discussed.

#### 4.1. The War

Spaces like railway station, hospital, etc is the dominants' tool of control on black people in the context of war and apartheid, and the rules and regulations therein established and constructed Michael' s identity as a product of the disciplines of power.

Borrowing from the Greek philosophy, Coetzee claims that war is the father of all and king of all in the beginning of the novel which laid the narrating tone. "As they sat side by side on the bed, barely daring to whisper, the conviction grew in them that the real war had come to Sea Point and found them out" (Coetzee, 1983: p. 19). The above sentence describes a short living episode of Michael K and his mother under the war. They are afraid of being killed by the war, and peace is a luxury for them. It is the uneasiness and worries of living every day that enforce them to escape from the war and back to the countryside. War is cruel and is ridiculously equal for everyone. War makes people being crude and cold. During the escape of Michael K, K was stopped by a soldier and enforced to show everything he carries even the box of ashes of his mother. The war stirs the society in turbulence and adds up to the amount of camps.

#### 4.2. The Apartheid

Foucault has written eloquently on the problem of discipline, and he believes that discipline starts with the allocation of space to people (Foucault, 2016). All these spaces are filled with the restriction, surveillance and discipline, including railway station, school, hospital and prison in the disguise of the camp. When Michael wants to escape from the war, he was firstly limited by the "permit" system in the railway station, and K's ticket, which could never be honored, also illustrated the restriction of black people's rights at that time and their inability to obtain freedom.

School is also a camp, kind of children's type. The teachings of the school help K to get a job in the gardening department, yet the fragmented memories and consciousness of the school scattered throughout the novel reveal, step by step, the true nature of children's schools in South Africa. The school is a tool of discipline and Michael K was disciplined very well.

In Michael K' dream, he lay in pitch darkness in the dormitory of Huis Norenius and "Afraid to move...lay with his eyes open so that he would not lapse back into the perils of sleep" (Coetzee, 1983: p. 124). The memory of school is dark and uneasy. When he was hungry, he recalled that "As a child K had been hungry, like all the children of Huis Norenius. Hunger had turned them into animals who stole from one another's plates and climbed the kitchen enclosure to rifle the garbage cans for bones and peelings" (Coetzee, 1983: p. 115). There is little food to eat in the school, so hunger reminds him of that unfortunate experience. From his involuntary recalls, Coetzee reveals to us the darkness and discipline of the school. And he comments that "whatever the nature of the beast that had howled inside him, it was starved into stillness" (Coetzee, 1983: p. 115).

The camps everywhere are the art of distributing power over space, symbolizing the statutes imposed on people by apartheid. In hospitals, K was enforced to eat, to exercise and to think as they wished. In the camp, he was confined and repressed but in the disguise of supporting and caring.

## 5. Confinement in Physical Space

According to Lefebvre, physical space is the foundation of human living and essential for the depiction of a character. In the novel, the blacks were oppressed and confined both in city of Capetown and countryside of Prince Albert. Michael K's identity as a human being was challenged, destroyed and fell into living crisis.

### 5.1. City of Capetown

Coetzee's writing about Michael K and his mother's flight from Capetown demonstrates the crisis of identity in this space.

Hospital should be a place where people who are sick or injured are treated and taken care of by doctors and nurses according to Cambridge Dictionary's definition. However, Coetzee describes Anna's treatment in the hospital like this: "neglected by nurses who had no time to spend cheering up an old woman"; "when she wanted a bedpan, however, there was seldom anyone to bring it. She had no dressing-gown"; "The tears she wept on the sixth day were thus largely tears of relief that she was escaping this purgatory" (Coetzee, 1983: p. 9). These words describes Anna's living predicament in the hospital. The hospital in the novel is not a healing place anymore, but a purgatory where Anna's basic physical and spiritual need cannot be satisfied and desiring to escape. Glimpsing through suffering of Anna, the medical condition that Michael K will meet is vivid.

The living environment of Michael K is also concerning. His mother and him live under the stairs of the Côte d'Azur where had been intended for air-conditioning equipment, which war warned of dangerous. "In the middle of the night he woke chilled to the bone. Unable to sleep, unable to leave because of the curfew" (Coetzee, 1983: p. 11). This scene vividly reveals Michael K's living crisis. The protagonist's choices were confined, nothing he can do but stay there quietly like a ghost. Michael K lives in a bleak, moist, and somber environment, but still worries everyday that the white house owner will drive them away.

Michael K living space was oppressed and confined in Capetown, which results his confusion about the identity as a human being. Thus, Michael K and his mother decide to escape from the Capetown and to chase their identity of belonging.

### 5.2. Countryside of Prince Albert

Life in Prince Albert is relatively private and free, but still invaded by oppressed power and compressed of his living (physical) space, which is Visagie's grandson

and the soldiers. In the first encounter between Michael K and Visagie's grandson, a lot of simple sentences were used by Visagie's grandson. For example, "Is this all you eat? 'You should plant potatoes' 'What is your name?' 'Michael, there is nothing to eat!' 'What the hell does that mean?'" (Coetzee, 1983: p. 105). By making use of these sentences, Coetzee reveals to us the commanding and contemptuous figure of the white. Out of these, Michael K feels stifling and decides to escape there again. The soldiers scoured the mountains and destroyed Michael K's house (the hole). Worrying about being discovered by the soldiers, Michael K thought that "what I make ought to be careless, makeshift, a shelter to be abandoned without a tugging at the heartstrings" (Coetzee, 1983: p. 170). A house is not a reality for him anymore, but a makeshift. Thus, he dug a hole and used the minimum amount of original materials to build the 'house'. He tries to erase his living traces in the mountain by every means and hiding himself in the hole for most of the time. What food he ate meant nothing to him, insects and roots could be the food. However, though he endeavors to keep his house from being discovered, he finally fails. Physical space of Michael K was also compressed infinitely in the countryside of Prince Albert.

## 6. Awakening in Mental Space

Being confined in physical space and oppressed in social space, Michael K lost his own identity. Under suppression, Michael K gradually awakened in mental space and began to resist. Lefebvre emphasizes the orienting function of mental space in people's actions. Mental space can provide the guideline to see how abstract thought becomes concrete action. Thus, this chapter will mainly analyze Michael K' awakening in mental space and his defiance after awakening.

### 6.1. Escaping from the Oppression in the Camp

Michael K was once called "a great escape artist" by the doctor (Coetzee, 1983: p. 279). His adult life is on the way of escaping.

Though the white determined to discipline the black, Michael K was not that disciplined as they wanted. The "permit" system can never block him. With the knowledge he may learn from the school, he made a wheelbarrow and pushed his mom to Prince Albert. For the first time, they were warned by soldiers and have no choice but to give up. Reflecting on his first experience, they started off again. Along the way, they were despised and threatened but did not compromise. After his mom died in the hospital, he was taken to the Jakkalsdrif camp involuntarily. There are "a three-metre fence surmounted with a strand of barbed wire" (Coetzee, 1983: p. 123) around the camp. But the policeman said that "this isn't jail" (Coetzee, 1983: p. 129) and they have to work in their will to earn the money and food. Michael K found that he had changed from a wanderer to a refugee. Unlike other refugees willing to endure physical and mental torture in the dark prison, after learning the essence of the camp, Michael K decide to escape. After he managed to escape, "he walked all night, feeling no fatigue,

trembling sometimes with the thrill of being free” (Coetzee, 1983: p. 164). His flight demonstrated his resistance to segregation and oppression.

Later, Michael is taken to the hospital as a friend of the enemy and is responsible for feeding them. At the hospital, they pressed him for everything about the farm, yet he kept silent and ate nothing. When interrogated by the officers at the hospital, Michael K told the doctor that “I am not in the war” (Coetzee, 1983: p. 229), but he is of course embedded in the torture of war. If not the war, Michael K may not be expelled from the Capetown or scoured in the pumpkin land and could live in his will and catch little attention. He knows facts of war but denies to admit it, showing his defiance in a way. Through the doctor’s words, we know that Michael K eventually escaped the camp. He did not accept the rules and disciplines in the camp and chase the freedom bravely. In the disciplined one’s eyes, camp is a refuge from hunger. But Michael K said that “I can’t eat camp food” (Coetzee, 1983: p. 244). For Michael K, the camp is the birthplace of suffering. Keeping silence and escaping from the camp is Michael K’s defiance to the discipline of the dominant.

## 6.2. Chasing the Freedom in the Farm

The farm is Michael K’s spiritual conversion, in which keeps away from the war and oppression of the city. In the depths of his mind, her mother sowed him with the seeds of farm’s dream. Life in the farm is simple and warm. Thus, he starts the journey of chasing dream. After his mother died, he experienced a short period of confusion and loss. However, his dream was inspired again when he was enforced to work for the dominants. When he settled in the dreamed land, Coetzee comments his life in farm: “He in a pocket outside time. Cape Town and the war and his passage to the farm slipped further and further into forgetfulness” (Coetzee, 1983: p. 101) Michael K is enjoying his life. When Visagie’s grandson came to the farm, his consciousness of freedom motivates him to escape. On the way of escaping, he can’t forget the farm, and he thought “he would forget the boy and remember only the farm” (Coetzee, 1983: p. 110). Leaving that farm is grieved. In the Jakkalsdrif camp, “he thought of the cool of his cave up in the mountains, of the streams that never stopped running” (Coetzee, 1983: p. 124). After K escaped from the camp, Coetzee tells us “It is not for the house that I have come” (Coetzee, 1983: p. 165) through K’s consciousness which reveals that Michael K is not cared about the old house in the farm but the freedom in the farm. The pumpkins planted on the farm were his spiritual anchor and his life continues with the rise and fall of the pumpkin seeds on the land. Until his subsequent journey back to the camp when he was recaptured again, taken to the hospital, and finally back to Cape Town, these pumpkin seeds were well preserved in the place of his heart, leaving a trace of engraving for his dream space.

## 7. Conclusion

With the assistance of Lefebvre’s space theory, this thesis centers on the identity



construction of Michael K in *Life and Times of Michael K*. Inspired by plenty of spatial descriptions in the novel, the thesis respectively analyzes the social space, physical space and mental space in which Michael K's identity develops. The three spaces influence each other. The living crisis of physical space is due to the oppression and discipline of social space. The oppression of social space is reflected in physical space in some way. Basically, the combined force of oppression on Michael K in social space and the confinement on Michael K in physical space result to his mental awakening. His mental awakening guides him to escape from the social discipline and oppression and chase the dream and freedom in the farm. This thesis contends that Michael K develops from being passively disciplined to actively chasing his freedom and dream, which inspires the silent other in South Africa to find a positive life direction through free choice and action.

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