

## **An Analysis of Snow White's Quest for Self-Identity in Barthelme's Snow White from the Spatial Perspective**

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**Abstract:** In Donald Barthelme's postmodern novel *Snow White*, the author adopts spatial reconstruction as the core narrative strategy to completely subvert the narrative logic of traditional fairy tales. Based on Henri Lefebvre's trialectic of space, this paper analyzes the multiple existential dilemmas confronting the heroine Snow White from three dimensions: physical space, social space, and spiritual space. At the physical level, the constant transformation of physical space causes confusion in Snow White's self-identity. Enclosed apartments and mechanized workplaces serve as explicit sites for disciplining female bodies, reducing women's bodies to objects of observation and discipline. At the social level, the oppression of patriarchy and interpersonal alienation hinder Snow White's quest for self-identity. Indifferent neighborhood relations and instrumental interpersonal interactions construct an alienated social network, reflecting the collapse of individual connections in postmodern society and women's marginalized status. At the spiritual level, distorted self-perception and the absence of redemptive natural spaces deprive Snow White of the foundation and reference for subjective construction. The interplay and conflict of these spaces collectively reveal the arduous process of contemporary women's quest for self-identity under disciplinary systems and alienated relationships.

**Keywords:** *Snow White*; Barthelme; Spatial Theory; Self-Identity

### **1. Introduction**

As a classic text of postmodern literature, Donald Barthelme's *Snow White* subverts the gender myths embedded in traditional fairy tales through fragmented narration and subversive reconstruction. Barthelme's fiction breaks the linear narrative structure through fragmentation, resulting in open, radiation-style narratives

devoid of plot development, climaxes, or authentic endings [12]. By resetting and transforming narrative spaces, the novel dismantles the romantic imagination of Grimm's fairy tales and profoundly exposes the survival dilemmas of modern women constrained by physical environments and social structures. In *Snow White*, Barthelme shapes characters' identities and traits through language and validates their "presence" via incessant verbose monologues. Nevertheless, such presence is merely vocal expression, an existence void of substantive content and meaning [11]. From the oppressive apartment where Snow White resides to the voyeuristic workplace, the spaces depicted by Barthelme are no longer neutral backdrops for plot development but tangible sites of power operation.

The image of "Snow White" has evolved into a prevalent discourse ingrained in public consciousness, subtly shaping modern urban individuals. To a certain extent, like other prevalent contemporary discourses, it exercises power and participates in the production and construction of modern personalities [7]. The anti-foundationalism of postmodern deconstruction dismantles established rules and standards and undermines their legitimacy. Postmodern writers aim to subvert authority and tradition, break free from the constraints of metanarratives, mock authoritative discourses, desacralize language, and dissolve monolithic linguistic structures [14]. The intrinsic correlation between spatial writing and women's predicaments provides a unique analytical perspective for understanding gender politics in the postmodern context. Adopting Lefebvre's trialectic of space encompassing physical, social, and spiritual space [5], this paper explores how Barthelme's *Snow White* reveals women's alienation under the dual oppression of consumerism and patriarchy, as well as their struggles to break free from spatial discipline through the interplay of architectural, social, and psychological spaces.

## 2. Snow White's Bodily Dilemmas in Physical Space

In Barthelme's reconstructed fairy-tale world, space functions as a crucial site for disciplining female bodies. This chapter focuses on the typical physical spaces in the novel and explores how spatial distribution, visual mechanisms, and daily routines impose control and alienation on female bodies. Barthelme's *Snow White* alienates traditional social values. Such alienation refers to the distortion of social values in literary works under external influences, where the moral preachments of "goodness" in traditional fairy tales are blurred and transformed in postmodern discourse, replaced by meaningless trivial ridicule [2]. Seemingly neutral living spaces such as enclosed apartments and private bathrooms are embedded with intricate power operations. An analysis of Snow White's living conditions in these spaces clearly demonstrates how postmodern society confines women to fixed gender roles and bodily norms through spatial design. The obscure expressions, explicit sexual depictions, vulgar psychological portrayals, and blatant social and political dissent prevalent in postmodern culture surpass the most radical and subversive cultural features of high modernism [8].

### 2.1 Apartment: A Closed Cage of Sexual Objectification

The apartment in the novel essentially serves as a closed cage that objectifies women sexually. From the outset, the cohabitation space of Snow White and the seven dwarfs presents a site of dual oppression, defined as a "non-home dwelling". In terms of spatial division, women's activities are strictly confined to private domestic domains such as kitchens and bedrooms. The description "She is always scrubbing the floors or our beards" chains Snow White's existential value to domestic labor and male needs. Spaces intended for relaxation and comfort are transformed into sites of female discipline, where her bodily movements and time allocation are entirely dictated by male demands. In contrast, public spaces such as living rooms are exclusively occupied by men as domains for communication, rest, and authority assertion.

This rigid spatial segregation embodies the patriarchal division of gender roles: women are positioned as indoor service providers, while

men dominate spatial control. Under the "gaze of power", Snow White's body and subjectivity are fragmented. Her cheeks, limbs, and lips are metaphorically compared to cigarette paper, fine porcelain, and Burgundy wine respectively, framing her as an object for viewing, appreciation, and consumption. These metaphors expose her objectified status and provoke reflections on the essence of female beauty under the gaze of power [10].

The apartment's surveillance system renders such oppression inescapable. Paul's voyeuristic behavior through the keyhole is metaphorically depicted as "a round eye", echoing Foucault's panopticism. This omnipresent gaze compels constant self-discipline in Snow White, who regulates her words, gestures, and expressions under the perpetual threat of surveillance. The apartment is thus reduced to an inescapable closed cage, where women's bodies are sexually objectified and subjected to endless scrutiny.

### 2.2 Bathroom: A Space of Self-Objectification Under Gaze

The bathroom constitutes a private space where Snow White engages in self-objectification under implicit surveillance. The detailed depiction of the bathroom scene in Section 37 of the novel strips the privacy of this intimate space and lays bare the cruelty of female bodily self-objectification. The line "She puts cream on herself like basting meat" [1] subverts the nurturing essence of skincare products, equating bodily care with the preparation of food to be consumed. Snow White's body is stripped of subjectivity and reduced to a passive object waiting for male appreciation and consumption.

Her seemingly autonomous skincare routine is essentially an unconscious compliance with externally imposed disciplinary standards. Societal aesthetic norms for female skin and physique become the sole criteria for measuring women's value. The bathroom, originally an exclusive private domain, is transformed into a performance stage. Patriarchy formulates rigid aesthetic standards for female bodies, while capital reinforces these standards through cosmetic and skincare commodities. The collusion of patriarchy and capitalism turns the bathroom into a site of self-discipline, where every movement Snow White makes in front of the mirror reinforces her identity as a gazed and consumed object.

### **3. Identity Crisis in Social Space**

A shift from private to public spaces reveals the profound gender politics embedded in Barthelme's social spaces. No discussion of the contrast between the "goodness" of Grimm's *Snow White* and the "immorality" of Barthelme's adaptation can overlook the fact that literary creation transcends writers' personal emotional expression [3]. This chapter examines Snow White's identity dilemmas in two core social spaces-workplaces and communities-and reveals how postmodern social spatial structures intensify the symbolization and alienation of female subjectivity. In the glass-partitioned office and performative community interactions, women are reduced to consumable symbols and perpetual objects of collective gaze, reflecting the alienation of interpersonal relationships and the pervasive identity crisis of modern women.

The workplace functions as a typical postmodern symbol of gender stratification. Snow White's occupation as a typist is far from a random career choice but a precise metaphor for gender symbolization in postmodern society. On the one hand, consumerist ideology fuels the prosperity of postmodern fairy tales and guarantees readership, with market principles penetrating every link of literary creation and distribution. On the other hand, the relative independence of superstructure enables postmodern fairy tales to transcend real-world constraints, reflect the inherent contradictions of consumer society, and provoke in-depth reflections on social reality and individual existence [4].

The repetitive, mechanical operation of typewriting symbolizes the social discipline imposed on women. Female employees are stripped of independent thoughts and emotions, reduced to obedient executive tools. Snow White's typing movements embody the social gender coding that dictates women's obedience and service to institutional systems. Moral decline is implied through metaphors in the novel, where sexual desire is mistaken for romantic love, degrading humans to biological creatures devoid of social attributes and prioritizing physical needs above all else [9].

The glass partitions in offices further exacerbate gendered oppression. The transparency of glass renders female bodies permanently visible as male spectacles, while its isolating nature confines women to a marginal position-visible yet inaccessible. This spatial setup perfectly reproduces social sexual fantasies: women are

expected to maintain beauty and docility for male gaze yet denied equal discourse power and agency. The workplace thus evolves into a site of gender power struggle, where women's professional identities are erased, leaving only objectified gender symbols.

The community epitomizes the alienation of modern interpersonal relationships. In the novel, authentic emotional connections are replaced by performative social interactions, and Snow White is situated at the center of this alienated performance. The marriage of Jane and Bill exemplifies such performativity. Their candid admission that "we pretend to be happy" exposes the falsity of marital warmth. Intimate interactions and tacit cooperation become staged performances for community spectators, with family dinners and neighborhood greetings serving as props for constructing a "happy family" spectacle, while genuine emotional needs are completely neglected.

More critically, the community's collective voyeurism of Snow White constitutes collusive oppression. Gossip about her appearance and excessive scrutiny of her private life reduce her body and daily life to consumable spectacles. Community residents act as both spectators and perpetrators, reinforcing the social discipline of female surveillance through collective gaze and gaining distorted group identity from such collusion. The community thus loses its function as a warm communal space, becoming a microcosm of alienated interpersonal relationships where everyone participates in mutual oppression and self-loss under the manipulation of spectacle culture.

### **4. The Betrayal of Spiritual Space**

Faced with dual oppression from physical and social spaces, spiritual space becomes Snow White's final domain of resistance. This chapter explores Snow White's spiritual struggles and tentative self-redemption amid distorted mirror cognition and the absence of redemptive natural spaces. Barthelme's depiction of spiritual spaces reveals how traditional gender perceptions discipline female psychology while implying potential paths for breaking disciplinary shackles. These fragmented spiritual panoramas expose the hardships and attempts of contemporary women's self-redemption in alienated environments.

#### **4.1 Mirror Imagery: Spiritual Alienation and**

### Cognitive Reconstruction

The recurring mirror imagery in the novel is not a trivial decorative prop but a literary metaphor for Lacan's mirror stage, fully illustrating Snow White's spiritual evolution from self-alienation to cognitive reconstruction. In the initial stage, the mirror embodies social discipline, reflecting a standardized "perfect princess" image shaped jointly by patriarchal aesthetics and capitalist logic, rather than Snow White's authentic self. The stereotyped traits of fair skin, slender figure, and docile temperament become rigid criteria for self-evaluation. The mirror's reflection acts as a dominant "other", overshadowing and suppressing her true self.

The cracking of the mirror in the middle stage marks the awakening of spiritual resistance. When Snow White smashes the mirror, the scene of "a hundred versions of herself in the fragments" carries profound symbolic significance. The broken shards dismantle the single, rigid aesthetic standard, revealing diverse fragmented selves-tired from housework, angry at surveillance, and defiant of submission. These fragmented images deviate from the perfect princess stereotype yet reconstruct a genuine and multifaceted self. The act of smashing the mirror represents a rejection of socially constructed cognitive frameworks and a declaration of self-awakening.

At the end of the novel, Snow White refuses to be reduced to a mirrored object under Paul's gaze, completing the closed loop of cognitive reconstruction. When Paul attempts to confine her to the passive role of the gazed, Snow White no longer defines her self-worth through external mirror reflections. Instead, she breaks free from the gaze with absolute subjectivity. The mirror loses its disciplinary function and becomes an ordinary object, while Snow White achieves independent and complete self-cognition by resisting objectification.

### 4.2 Alienated Natural Space: The Collapse of Spiritual Redemption

Unlike traditional fairy tales, where forests and springs symbolize healing and spiritual redemption, Barthelme's novel replaces these classic redemptive images with urban landfills and polluted water, realizing a thorough "denaturalization" of narrative settings. This writing strategy exposes the dual alienation of women and nature in contemporary society. Postmodern writers actively adopt the strategy of

"realized metaphor", resurrecting metaphorical objects from non-existence and endowing them with tangible presence in textual worlds [6]. In traditional fairy tales, forests serve as shelters for women fleeing patriarchal oppression, and springs symbolize the nourishment of life. Nature and women maintain an intimate symbiotic relationship. In Barthelme's adaptation, however, magical forests are replaced by urban landfills piled with plastic waste and stinking garbage. The decay and depression of landfills metaphorize the shrinkage of women's living spaces, reflecting how women are objectified and discarded in consumer society, abandoned once they lose utilitarian value due to aging or disobedience.

The depiction of pure springs polluted by detergents further reinforces the critique of dual alienation. As a symbol of cleanliness, detergents ironically become the source of natural pollution, satirizing the hypocritical patriarchal demand for the perpetual purity of women and nature. Patriarchy demands women and nature provide endless nourishment and service while destroying nature through industrial civilization and oppressing women through rigid discipline. Polluted springs can no longer sustain life, just as alienated women lose connection with their authentic selves and nature. The absence and alienation of natural spaces- the replacement of lush forests with garbage dumps and pure springs with polluted water-deprives women of the spiritual bond with nature and eliminates their last resort for spiritual salvation. This narrative not only criticizes industrial civilization but also reflects profoundly on the social structure that exploits women and nature simultaneously.

### 5. Conclusion

Through deconstructive spatial writing, Barthelme completely dismantles the romantic veil of traditional fairy tales in *Snow White*. From the enclosed apartment cage and symbolized workplace to the self-objectifying bathroom and alienated community network, women's bodies are trapped in meticulously designed spatial discipline.

These spaces are not isolated but interweave to form an interconnected power structure. Discipline in private apartments and public workplaces forms a closed loop of surveillance and control. Even spiritual spaces such as mirror cognition and natural redemption are penetrated

by patriarchal and capitalist forces. Mirrors evolve into tools of self-alienation, and nature falls victim to industrial civilization, proving that gender power colonizes all spatial dimensions. The essence of women's spatial dilemmas lies in the concretization of gender power relations in postmodern society. Women are deprived of dominance over physical spaces and subjected to persistent symbolization and spiritual discipline. Barthelme's narrative transcends individual fate to launch a thorough critique of the entire social structure. Postmodern fiction refuses single and exclusive interpretations rather than rejecting interpretation itself [13].

As implied by Snow White's final spiritual breakthrough, breaking the cycle of spatial discipline requires not only liberation from physical shackles but also reconstruction of symbolic orders and cognitive frameworks. Only in this way can women break free from the doomed fate of spatial confinement and realize the fundamental transformation from passive spatial objects to active subjective agents.

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