



## The Construction of Bernard's Identity in *The Counterfeiters* from The Perspective of Spatial Theory

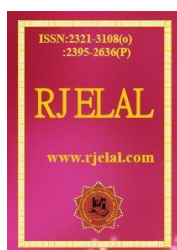
Huijie Xia<sup>1</sup>, Rui Sang<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Research Scholar, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Changping District, Beijing, China

<sup>2</sup>Research Supervisor, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Changping District, Beijing, China

\*Corresponding Author Email: [xiahuijie2001@163.com](mailto:xiahuijie2001@163.com)

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.3.289](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.3.289)



### Article info

Article Received: 16/07/2025

Article Accepted: 11/08/2025

Published online: 15/08/2025

### Abstract

André Gide (1869–1951), winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1947, is one of the most important figures in twentieth-century French literature. His only novel, *The Counterfeiters* (*Les Faux-monnayeurs*), has attracted wide attention from scholars in France and around the world. In recent years, scholars have studied *The Counterfeiters* from various perspectives, including narratology, imagologie, thematology... At the same time, the use of space theory to analyze the book is also worthy of attention. This paper uses Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory to analyze how physical space, social space, and mental space interact to influence the construction of Bernard's identity in *The Counterfeiters*. By the interaction of these three spaces, the study shows how Bernard moves from confusion about his identity to a relatively clear self-identity. This research aims to provide a reference for future studies on *The Counterfeiters*, and to provide inspiration and support for young people's identity exploration and growth.

**Keywords:** André Gide; *The Counterfeiters*; Henri Lefebvre; Spatial theory.

### 1.Introduction

André Gide (1869–1951) is one of the most important figures in twentieth-century French literature and won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1947. The French writer Malraux once said that Gide was a thinker both living and dead; as a writer, he did more than anyone else for his generation—for all of his generation (Yan 126).

Gide's ideas not only had a strong influence on his contemporaries but also continue to guide future generations. He produced a wide range of works during his lifetime, including fiction, drama, novels, autobiographies, diaries, letters, and translations.

Published in 1925, *The Counterfeiters* is Gide's only novel and took him six years to

complete. Written at the height of his intellectual and artistic maturity, it can be considered as his most important and comprehensive achievement. Like many of Gide's works, *The Counterfeiters* explores themes such as identity crisis, moral struggle, and the search for personal freedom. Among these, the reconstruction of identity is one of the novel's core concerns. So far, *The Counterfeiters* has been widely studied from various perspectives, including narratology, imagologie, thematology.

In recent years, spatial theory has become a new and promising approach in literary studies. Space is not only the physical setting of characters' actions, but also plays an important role in shaping their behavior and psychological development. It therefore has a strong influence on how identity is formed. This paper applies the spatial triad proposed by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre—physical space, social space, and mental space—to conduct a case study of the character Bernard in *The Counterfeiters*. It explores how different types of space interact with each other and contribute to Bernard's dynamic process of identity construction. Through this analysis, the paper aims to offer a spatial perspective on Gide's work, as well as literary insight into the identity struggles faced by individuals in modern society.

## 2. Physical space

Lefebvre develops the concept of spatial theory in his major work *The Production of Space*, published in 1974. In it, he states that as soon as we explore space in literary texts, we find it is everywhere and has diverse forms: included, described, projected, dreamed, speculated (Lefebvre 22). In *The Production of Space*, physical space is defined as "the practical-sensory and the perception of 'nature'." (Lefebvre 36) Physical space is tangible, perceptible, and shaped by lived experience. In practice, it can be used directly and precisely, corresponding to the practical needs of workplaces, urban

planning, and other related disciplines, thus forming the core of the traditional concept of space. Physical space refers to material space, such as nature, the universe, and so on. It is described through experience and includes territory, landscape, and land and represents one of the most fundamental elements in the novel. Physical space influences the formation of characters; the geographical environment subtly shapes their personalities. As Lefebvre points out: "Which fields are involved? First, the physical—nature, cosmos; then the mental (including logic and formal abstraction); and finally, the social." (Lefebvre 19) The original basis of social space lies precisely in natural, physical space. In literary works, our attention mainly focuses on the places where the plot unfolds. Physical space refers to a tangible, visible, and observable location. It can be specific places such as a house, a park, and so on.

Travel played an important role in Gide's life, and as a result, many of the characters in his works are marked by a strong sense of wandering or displacement. In *The Counterfeiters*, Gide created many characters connected to the theme of "travel," such as Édouard, who is passionate about traveling; Vincent and Laura, who go to a sanatorium in Pau; Olivier, who follows Passavant to Corse; and Bernard, who travels to Switzerland. Laura falls into moral decline during her journey; Olivier is led astray by the corrupt writer Passavant; and Bernard also experiences a brief moral lapse during his travels—stealing a suitcase. In this novel, travel often seems to be associated with immoral behavior. However, travel is also a way to enter new spaces. Through travel, the characters gain new experiences and values, and form new understandings of themselves. Bernard's travel path reflects the dynamic process of his identity construction.

His physical space experience can be divided into three key stages. The first stage is running away from home. By chance, he discovers a love letter written to his mother 17

years ago, through which he unexpectedly knows his illegitimacy. This revelation causes him to strongly reject his home, which was once a stable place, and he immediately chooses to leave home, beginning his journey of escape. After leaving home, Bernard goes to Luxembourg Park, where he meets his best friend, Olivier. After spending one night at Olivier's house, Bernard gets up at five in the morning and sets out on his adventure. He walks down Bonaparte Street along the Luxembourg fence to the riverbank, crosses the Seine, and, intoxicated by freedom, falls asleep on a bench in the park. Unsure of where to go next, he secretly follows Olivier to the train station to meet his uncle Édouard and takes Édouard's suitcase in order to create an opportunity to meet him.

The second stage is his experience in Switzerland. After meeting Édouard, Bernard goes to Switzerland with Édouard. In there, Bernard often climbs the Hallalin. According to Pierre Masson, low places represent evil, and the meaning of any journey or ascent is primarily to escape from that place of evil, even if this denial is disguised as conquest. The mountain peak, or the high place, is a concrete symbol of purity; it is Bernard's path to the absolute and the pure, a place where he seeks himself and pursues lofty spiritual ideals. However, this experience does not bring him true peace. As his journey progresses, he realizes that escape has not eased his inner unrest, and he begins to reflect on whether his act was correct and if he should return to his father's side.

The third stage is his return to Paris. After returning to Paris, Bernard successfully passes his baccalaureate. Once again, he walks into Luxembourg Gardens, sits on a bench, and begins to reflect on his direction and sense of belonging. As an important recurring space in *The Counterfeiters*, Luxembourg Park witnesses Bernard's flight and return, and more importantly, symbolizes the fluctuations and growth of his inner world. Bernard ultimately

chooses to return to his family, completing a full circle in physical space.

Bernard's physical spatial trajectory is not merely a change in geographical location but also an externalized path for identity construction; the structure of "travel - exploration - return" indicates that physical space plays a significant role in the dynamic formation of a character's identity.

### 3. Social space

Social space, as the transformation of natural space by society, gives the natural space social attributes, including laws, policies, and other factors. Social space focuses on the symbolic dimension of space; it does not refer to space itself but to other elements such as sacred power, rational logic, the state, or the rules of masculinity and femininity (Liu XVIII). "In a broad sense, social space encompasses perceived, conceived, and lived space; in a narrower sense, it refers to the space that opposes mental space understood critically and natural space." (Liu IX) "Once predominant, the trait of 'nature' fades and becomes subordinate. Conversely, the social character of space (the social relations it implies, contains, and conceals) begins to visibly prevail." (Lefebvre 100) Thus, today, as the social character of human living space becomes increasingly prominent, it is necessary to pay special attention to social space.

Space is filled with symbols, imbued with racism and patriarchy; it reflects social relations of production, reproduction, exploitation, domination, and submission." (Wu 49) In literary works, social space often manifests in the forms of families, schools, and courts, shaping characters' identities through daily orders and implicit rules. In this book, the family is a typical social space, a microcosm of the patriarchal structure. Even in the absence of the father, this structure persists in the minds of family members through law, ethics, and customs.

In *The Counterfeiters*, the father figure is generally absent: either deceased, silent, or distant from family affairs, and the mother is mostly responsible for family education and daily care. However, this kind of absence does not signify the disappearance of patriarchy. On the contrary, it is embedded in the spiritual structure of the character in a more hidden and deeper way. In the traditional family structure, the father is not merely a biological presence but also a symbolic anchor of the social-spatial order. Through the inheritance of family names, legal recognition, and the preservation of social etiquette, he provides stable spatial coordinates for family members. Bernard originally occupies a clear position as a "son" within this structure; however, upon learning that he is an illegitimate child, the legitimacy of this spatial position collapsed, triggering the disintegration of the spatial structure and consequently leading to his identity crisis. Bernard leaves home after discovering the truth, which shows that he respects essentially paternal authority. This proves his instinctive law-abidingness rather than anarchism. What he resents in Profitendieu is precisely the fact that the latter no longer guarantees his legitimacy.

As the son of a judge, Bernard unconsciously replicates his father's way of acting. After running away from home, although physically distant from the family, the behavioral patterns shaped by the social space had already been internalized as part of his self-identity. He secretly follows Olivier to the train station, takes Édouard's suitcase, and later quickly finds the hotel where Laura is staying. The father's influence is reproduced in Bernard's thoughts and actions in various ways. This "absent father" becomes a hidden psychological mechanism—not exerting pressure through direct authority, but instead implanted in the individual through discipline, judgment, and norms. It becomes an internal source of self-awareness and moral judgment. It is also at this point that we can see the complex and hidden intertwining of space and power:

the patriarchal structure in social space is internalized by the individual as self-regulation in spiritual space, thus forming a mechanism of power continuity that is both invisible and deep-rooted. Eventually, Bernard's return is not merely a matter of personality, but also signifies a renewed acceptance of the social space—his family. By finding a new position within the patriarchal structure, he completes the phased reconstruction of his identity.

In Bernard's process of identity construction, social space serves not only as a source of norms and constraints but also as the core field of identity crisis and reconstruction. It shapes the individual in a subtle and imperceptible manner, and even when physical distance is created, this influence persists and continues to function—causing him to unconsciously replicate his original ways of thinking and behavioral logic in new environments.

#### 4. Mental space

Mental space is a space of thought (Lefebvre<sup>37</sup>), a conceived space. It is a conceptualized space constructed by the subject's mental activities, which exists in the human brain. This space includes imagination, culture, and language, and is intertwined with the characters' life experiences, knowledge, and representations. In short, spirituality and imagination are integrated into mental space that plays an essential role in the inner world of human being. According to Lefebvre, mental space is influenced by both physical space and social space.

Gide's complicated family background has a great influence on his whole life, especially on his writing. His parents came from very different backgrounds and had very different personalities. Their marriage lacked true harmony, and the tensions between them plunged Gide into deep inner confusion. Gide's family is wealthy, so he did not have to worry about making a living or concern himself too much, and he did not pay much attention to the



social struggles of his time. As Maurois said, Gide only showed interest in the social struggles of his time very late, but not too much and not in depth (Yuan 98). This gave him the freedom to travel, think, and write, and he used most of his life to try to resolve his inner struggles. The crisis of identity is a central theme in Gide's work, thus, many of characters in his books also experience this kind of spiritual dilemma. They often go on journeys to explore themselves, trying to break away from fixed social roles and structures in search of spiritual freedom.

In *The Counterfeiters*, Bernard experiences complex emotional changes in the physical and social space, which can be divided into three stages: emotional escape, emotional projection, and emotional return. In the first stage, as his psychological space is filled with negative emotions such as rejection and anger, Bernard decides to flee from the social space and family space. Psychologically, this phase is marked by intense inner struggle, rejection, and a deep desire to break away from the established order. Without the discovery of his mother's letter by chance, Bernard might never have known that he was not the biological son of Profitendieu. However, this accidental discovery overturns completely his perception of his parents, his family, and even his own identity. On the one hand, he cannot accept his mother's betrayal of marriage and family. On the other hand, he still respects her due to her role as his mother. This emotional rupture puts Bernard in a deep ethical and emotional dilemma.

Bernard regards Profitendieu as his biological father due to the mother's concealment. Once he knows the truth, this confusion of identity makes it difficult for him to determine his place within the family. For an illegitimate child, the most unacceptable thing is the duty to love - in other words, to be loved by whom - and this becomes an unbearable burden. In a short period of time, Bernard loses both his mother and his father; he doesn't know how to act and what to do when facing this crisis, so he breaks with his family and opts to flee. It is not

just a physical departure, but the psychological tipping point that marks the beginning of his inner transformation. According to Pierre Masson, the travel is above all a renunciation, a separation—leaving a person, a society, a lifestyle, or even a former self.

In the second stage, Bernard attempts to reconstruct order through fantasy, yet this space remains fictional and unstable. Fleeing is rarely a departure into nothing. Leaving one's family often means seeking a new place to belong. Bernard's departure is not a complete rejection of the family, but rather to a subconscious attempt at "reconstruction". He projects his emotions onto Édouard and Laura, trying to rebuild intimate bonds based on personal choice: Édouard is an ideal father who does not exert excessive pressure, while Laura represents a gentle mother who does not bring trauma. However, as Gide points out in his adaptation of the tragedy of Oedipus, if escape serves to conceal a deep-seated desire - a desire that we can neither satisfy nor completely abandon - then it becomes a trap that we set for ourselves, and it becomes impossible to really move forward.

In fact, Bernard's "journey to freedom" is merely a shift from one emotional attachment structure to another. He believes he is moving toward a more authentic self, yet the new space he attempts to construct is, in fact, composed of fantasy and projection. In Nietzsche's philosophical framework, "passive nihilism" refers to the gradual weakening of the spirit that occurs when traditional value systems collapse while no new values have yet been established (Sun 333). This concept precisely reflects the value crisis Bernard faces in Switzerland: he has neither fully broken away from his past nor succeeded in establishing a new identity.

In the third stage, Bernard gains a new emotional anchor. Upon returning to Paris, Bernard passes successfully the baccalaureate. It is a proud moment for him, but nobody shares this good news with him. He knows that the

person most eager to hear the news is Monsieur Profitendieu, but his pride does not allow him to reach out. The Luxembourg Park is a key site in Bernard's mental space, which functions not only as a physical public space and a social venue for leisure but also as a psychological repository of memories and emotions. In this familiar place, he reflects on his direction and future belonging. He is no longer the teenager who just know runs away, but is gradually maturing psychologically and beginning to face the questions of "who am I" and "where do I come from". This park is not only a witness to his emotional memory, but also symbolizes the possibility of a spiritual return. Later, Monsieur Profitendieu talks with Édouard, and tells him about his constant affection for Bernard. Édouard conveys these words to Bernard, who remains silent—but inwardly, he is deeply moved. Bernard begins to realize that one's mental space cannot remain adrift without an anchor—not necessarily a geographical belonging, but certainly an emotional orientation. In the end, he chooses to return to his family, attempting to reconcile with his father and, to some extent, beginning to accept himself. This return does not signify the completion of a process of identification, but rather a shift from emotional evasion to active engagement with the question of identity. It marks a crucial turning point and an important attempt in Bernard's journey of self-construction.

The mental space provides an internal stage for Bernard's identity reconstruction. By absorbing influences from physical and social spaces, it gradually guides him toward a limited acceptance and repositioning of self. Bernard neither fully succumbs to the established order nor indulges in illusory self-imagination; instead, he achieves a creative repositioning of his own place on the premise of a clear recognition of limitations. The operational mechanism of this psychological space profoundly reveals the complex dialectical relationship in which subjectivity is both shaped

by social structures and retains the possibility of self-reconstruction.

## 5. Conclusion

In Bernard's process of identity construction, movements within physical space create the geographical conditions for identity reconstruction; the patriarchal system continuously exerts psychological discipline on him through social space; and the mental space serves as an internal stage for his identity reconstruction. These three spaces are not isolated but are closely linked, leading to Bernard's "return." Yet, Bernard remains in a dynamic process of identity construction. Bernard attempts to get rid of the label of "illegitimate child" and explore a new identity by spatial flight. His short stay in Switzerland offers only the illusion of freedom, while his return is more like a compromise. Thus, Bernard ultimately remains in an unfinished process of identity construction. This kind of condition not only reflects the inherent instability of the modern subject but also mirrors the identity crises commonly faced by adolescents in their identity exploration.

Nowadays, with the increasing competition in the society, many young people are also faced with the identity dilemma of "who am I" and "where do I belong". However, the establishment of identity is not a matter of rebellion or obedience, but a process of continuous exploration in dynamic spatial practice, in order to find the position between multiple spaces. From the analysis of Bernard's identity construction, it is hoped that this study can provide inspiration and support for contemporary youth's identity exploration and growth.

## References

- Chen, L. (2011). 论纪德叙事性作品中的精神困境  
[On the spiritual dilemmas in Gide's narrative works] (Master's thesis). Jiangnan University.
- Gide, A. (1962). *Les faux-monnayeurs*. Gallimard.

- Lefebvre, H. (1981). *La production de l'espace*. Presses des Éditions Anthropos.
- Liu, H. (2021). *空间的生产* [The production of space] (S. Wei, Trans.). Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Masson, P. (1983). *André Gide, voyage et écriture*. Presses universitaires de Lyon.
- Masson, P. (2022). *Lire Les Faux-monnayeurs*. Presses universitaires de Lyon.
- Sun, Z. (2009). *权力意志* [The will to power]. Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Wu, N. (2007). *日常生活批判—列斐伏尔思想研究* [Critique of everyday life: A study of Henri Lefebvre's thought]. Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Yan, S. (2005). *萨特的世纪——哲学研究* [Sartre's century: A philosophical study]. Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Yuan, S. (1987). *从普鲁斯特到萨特* [From Proust to Sartre]. Guilin: Lijiang Publishing House.