

Essay on understanding caroline keatleys mother said i never should in terms of f...

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several sites that are in themselves incompatible. Use Foucault's Theory of heterotopias analyses the use and representation of space in Charlotte Keatley's *My Mother Said I Never Should*.

Foucault's above mentioned statement in the scholarly article of *Other Spaces*, discussed the concept of heterotopia or heterotopic spaces (1986). This concept referred to real spaces that could be physical or mental and coexist with the spaces generally acknowledged by the society (1986). He formed six principles to explain this. He observes that although according to the knowledge accumulated by humans, several ideas and concepts are unsuited to be present together, they often do coexist simultaneously. Such a heterotopia is observed in the play by Charlotte Keatley, *My Mother Said I Never Should* (1988). This essay discusses the use of heterotrophic spaces within the play. By using Foucault's fifth principle of heterotopia here, we can see theater as a heterotopic space because it is not freely accessible; a certain charge has to be given to enter it, that is, a ticket has to be bought. His second principle can also be reflected in the theater having a defined function and it being reflective of the society in which it exists. The adage "art (theater here) imitates life" perhaps clarifies this.

The title of the play suggests a lack of freedom, a confined space of some kind; it attempts to show that women's lives are governed by a set of rules across four generations (Sugarwala, 1996). All the women in the play are affected by the society's treatment of women, their treatment of each other, and the consequences of male activities such as war on the women's lives. It

then seems as if all the characters are in a heterotopic crisis of sorts. In his first principle, Foucault gives examples of this crisis state as seen in pregnant women and adolescents.

There is a certain form of heterotopia that I would call crisis heterotopias, i. e., there are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are, in relation to society and to the human environment in which they live, in a state of crisis. (Foucault 24)

Naturally, the heterotopic space here is of the mental kind. It can be seen that the crisis here is not pregnancy or adolescence, but womanhood. Thus, we can also see the appropriateness of Foucault's following words:

Heterotopias obviously take quite varied forms and perhaps no one absolutely universal form of heterotopia would be found (24).

In this second principle of heterotopias, Foucault states the following:

each heterotopia has a precise determined function within a society and the same heterotopia can, according to the synchrony of the culture in which it occurs, have one function or another. (Foucault 25)

Foucault says here that heterotopias are reflective of the society in which they exist. Hence, if the mental space or heterotopia that the characters of the play live in is considered, the women's attitude is reflective of the society in which they live. While Doris goes about doing the daily chores that a homemaker in the 1940's would do, that is, dusting, etc., she ignores her

daughter's, that is Margaret's state of mind, and is absorbed in the ritualistic form of upbringing children that was practiced in the era. Even when Margaret comes up with questions that reflect a child's curiosity, Doris contemplates the question, but chooses to ignore it and her daughter's activities. The following excerpt exemplifies this fact:

Margaret: What happens when you die?

Doris: (long pause) I'll bring you some cocoa presently. (I. ii. 14)

Moreover, Doris continues to monitor her daughter's actions and reprimands her for actions that show an expression of freedom, such as; she stops Margaret from swinging along with the rhythms being played on the piano, and suggests that she is not progressing in her classical music knowledge and that she should be "be on Beethoven by now" (I. ii. 14). Doris' attitude is reflective of the general attitude toward children that was shown by many parents of this era. Similarly, Jackie's "hippie" qualities are reflective of the generation in which she lived, and Rosie's somewhat selfish behavior is reflective of the attitude of the post-war world's children.

The women's attitude toward each other is definitely affected by the ideas of the era. Thus, in the third generation, Jackie is treated with far more kindness than Margaret, because the norms of the generation suggest that children be treated gently so that affection can be returned. Jackie and Doris's relationship is an illustration of the fact. Doris does not reprimand the child Jackie when she breaks a mug. In the mother-daughter relationship of Margaret and Jackie, there is a change from the mother-daughter

relationship between Doris and Jackie, and this is again reflective of the era. Women's freedom to go to work is encouraged in contrast to the encouragement of focusing on familial life. When Margaret reprimands Jackie for having premarital sex and giving birth, she is showing that the heterotopia (which is the space her mind is in) is reflecting the views of the society. Similarly, the changes in women's attitudes or their mental heterotopias in reflection to the pre-war and post-war societies are represented by Doris and Margaret respectively. Doris focuses on familial matters, and Margaret, on her career as shown below.

Margaret: I will get a proper job.... I'm not wasting my life.... I'm going to be different! Women did so much during the war: there's nothing to stop us now.

(II. II. PP. 16-27)

The very first act of the first scene is set in a waste ground, with the main characters, Doris, Margaret, Jackie, and Rosie as children in their individual generations, with each character dressed in the manner of its era and displaying the general or assumed nature of women of their respective era. Thus, by beginning the play with all the characters in a waste ground, Keatley enables the audience to view them in juxtaposition to each other. The audience is presented with a point of view that all the characters as alike, and all the while, this gives them an idea about the different natures of these similar characters—such as Doris's naive uncertainty. Margaret's insecurities, Jackie's wildness, and Rosie's complicities. Jackie and Margaret are nine years of age, Doris is five years old, and Rosie is eight, and they are

all playing together. This is an impossible scene in a real world, where a grandmother and a granddaughter cannot play together as children, but it is possible in a utopian world. This presentation is made possible by following a nonlinear manner in forming the plot. Thus, Foucault's third principle is shown here:

The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. (Foucault 23)

The waste ground represents a heterotopia as the audience is watching the real play, where the actors are of the same age, and Foucault says, "(they do) exist in reality, where (they) exert a sort of counteraction on the position that that they occupy in a utopian world" (24). However, similar to the mirror, which Foucault calls a "utopia" as it is "a placeless place," the waste ground is also a utopia. The characters are present in a form and location where they cannot possibly coexist (24), They were born in different generations and are ages apart from each other, so they cannot possibly be children coexisting in the same period of time. Thus, the waste ground is a virtual space.

All the spaces where the women are shown in the play are not stereotypical female locations, such as the kitchen. Rather, all the locations are gender neutral, such as gardens, hospital, backyards, and offices (Jain 1996). It seems as if the play, intends to create a sense of male characters intruding upon the lives of the female characters. Right from Doris who tried to save herself and her family from the atrocities of the World War II to Rosie who

sang slogans against nuclear warfare waged in the era all the women in the play have experienced war. Moreover, Margaret even expected that the efforts of women during the war would change the way they were conceived by society. The fact that all the four generations of women were affected by war, which is a domain advocated and practiced under masculine control, further emphasizes the idea of the play intending to create a specific space for the female. The female children also indulge in behavior that is considered shocking and unacceptable by societal standards. The sexual explorations of each other bodies, the play-acting involving the process of giving birth, and the sadistic plans of matricide, are all opposition to the ideas of pictures associated with women. The act of a woman giving away her infant child her own sake, which is considered inviolable, is also shown to oppose the idealistic image of women. Charlotte Keatley has herself professed that the reason she jumbled the chronology of the play was owing to the fact that she believes the “child remains inside the woman often shouting what the adult refuses to hear. Therefore, the child scenes are not nostalgic or coy; these girls are serious, and out of the public eye, they are not ‘good’” (Charlotte Keatley, Preface). The waste ground is the secret location where the girls can be themselves. Thus by creating such a space for feminism, the play again showing the heterotopic space in which the play was made: a woman’s world. As heterotopic spaces have a manner of closing and opening and being accessible only after a commission is paid, the play seems to say that to enter this heterotopic space, that is, the woman’s world, a person had to be of the female gender or show sympathy and empathy to the issues of the gender. This also resonates to the sentiments

of Foucault's fifth principle of heterotopia that states the following:

Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening the closing that both isolates

them and makes them penetrable. In general, the heterotopic site is not freely accessible like a public place. Either the entry is compulsory, as the case of entering a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures. (Foucault 26)

Foucault states the following in his fourth principle:

Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time First of all, there are heterotopias of indefinitely accumulating time, for example museums and libraries, Museums and libraries have become heterotopias in which time never stops building up and topping its own summit (Foucault 26)

The play *My Mother Said I never Should* is not a very dramatic one, but it very effectively uses structure in the plot to generate a sense of suspension by holding back information. For example, the audience is left wondering the consequences of the fact that Margaret takes the infant Rosie away from her biological mother, Jackie. However this is shown to the audience only in the last scene, where the plot development leads to the conclusion of this scene. Thus, the audience is left in a state of suspense for three scenes. Because the different periods are combined, the audience can view the change in the relationship between Jackie and Rosie before and after Rosie becomes aware about who is her biological mother. The scenes in the play are not structured

and formed in a chronological order. However, the juxtaposition of varied periods, that is, the four generations, enables the audience to understand the similarities and the contrasts in the lives of the women in the play. The disarray of the chronological order of the events is intended to emphasize the gist of the play, and it in turn highlights the concept of heterotopia as propounded by Michel Foucault. Thus, this answers the question posed in this paper, as the play indeed proves Foucault's theory that the heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible true.

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