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# An interpretation of the imagery symbol of the Panopticon in *The Eye in the Door*

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**Abstract:** *The Eye in the Door* is one of the masterpieces of Pat Barker, a famous contemporary British female writer. In this novel the image of the Panopticon stands out because of its high frequency and detailed descriptions, and it also becomes the key to the interpretation of the novel because of its relation to the fates of many characters and its metaphorical meanings. From the perspective of semiotics, this paper makes a progressive interpretation of this imagery symbol from three aspects: the features of the Panopticon in the surface sense, the surveillance function and power mechanism of the Panopticon in the deeper sense, and the Panopticon as the metaphor of the British society during the First World War in the social and cultural sense, then points out that the imagery symbol of the Panopticon is the encoding and embodiment of the writer's ideas. Through this imagery symbol, the writer criticizes the disciplinary characteristics and totalitarian tendency of the British society during the First World War and expresses her reflection on the First World War and its causes.

**Keywords:** disciplinary society; imagery symbol; Pat Barker; *The Eye in the Door*; the Panopticon

## 1 Introduction

Pat Barker (1943–) is a famous contemporary British female writer, renowned for her novels about war, especially the First World War. In 1995, she won the Booker Prize, the highest award in the field of contemporary English fiction, with her novel *The Ghost Road*. *The Eye in the Door* (1993) is another of her masterpieces, which won the Guardian Fiction Prize in 1993. Because of the continuity of characters and plot, *Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road* are widely known as the *Regeneration* trilogy, which “has attracted more critical attention and acclaim than any of Pat Barker’s previous work” (Brannigan 2005: 93). It is the *Regeneration* trilogy that put Barker into the ranks of classic contemporary English writers and “established her as a major contemporary British writer” (Knutsen 2010: 42). Following

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*Regeneration*, *The Eye in the Door* continues to tell the stories of William Rivers, the psychiatrist, Billy Prior, the officer and others in World War I. Rivers continues his duty of treating the soldiers and officers who have returned from the battlefield because of antiwar sentiments or various symptoms of mental illness such as shellshock. He sends them back to the battlefield after “healing” them. Unable to return to the front-line service due to severe asthma after undergoing psychiatric treatment, Prior temporarily works for Intelligence in the Ministry of Munitions, acting as a spy on the domestic anti-war movement and workers’ strikes in fact.

It is worth noting that although *The Eye in the Door* is a novel about the First World War, it turns the eye to the British home front instead of describing any battlefield, depicting the unusually tense atmosphere in Britain in the late period of the First World War: the pacifist movement is on the rise; the labor movement is in full swing; the increasing number of soldiers are sent home because of anti-war tendencies ... These particular concerns suggest that *The Eye in the Door* does not belong to the usual kind of anti-war novels showing the brutal scenes of war, and the frequent use of prison image in the novel reinforces this point. “Imagery symbols are the products after being re-endowed with emotional colors and ideological connotation by the author. After being encoded and transformed by the author’s creative thinking, the external images are re-presented in the article in the form of imagery symbols, and the image schemas of readers are mobilized in the process of reading the article, so that the readers can receive the ideas and concepts that the author wants to convey.” (Wang 2020: 12) The Panopticon in *The Eye in the Door* is just such an imagery symbol, which is the product of the author’s intention after “being encoded and transformed”, passing on the author’s ideas and concepts. Julia Kristeva, the French semiotician and literary critic, had a famous saying: “any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another.” (Kristeva 1986: 37) Because of the image of the Panopticon, *The Eye in the Door* is intertextually related to the assumption and theory of the Panopticon put forward by Bentham, a British utilitarian philosopher and advocate of prison reform. At the same time, because of Michel Foucault’s detailed explanation of Bentham’s assumption of the Panopticon, *The Eye in the Door* also has intertextuality with the theory of panopticism proposed by Foucault. Focusing on the imagery symbol of the Panopticon and extending the understanding of this symbol through intertextuality will help us grasp the ideas that the author tries to convey through this imagery symbol.

This paper will interpret *The Eye in the Door* from the perspective of semiotics with intertextuality as the medium, and progressively analyze the imagery symbol of the Panopticon from three aspects: the features of the Panopticon in the surface sense, the surveillance function and power mechanism of the Panopticon in the deeper sense, and the Panopticon as the metaphor of the British society during the First World War in the social and cultural sense. Through the interpretation, the

paper aims to dig out the deeper connotation of the novel beyond the anti-war theme and reveals the novel's criticism of the British society during the First World War.

## 2 The panoptical features of Aylesbury Prison

"Imagery symbols come into being through the author's processing to attract the readers' attention. The author integrates the thoughts and ideas that he wants to express into the imagery symbols with perceptual images so that the imagery symbols are more explicitly orientated" (Wang 2020: 12). In *The Eye in the Door* Barker first conveys the importance of the prison image to the readers through its highly frequent appearance. There are many plots related to prison in the novel and many characters are also more or less associated with prison. Beattie Roper's family can be said to be the most associated one with prison. All members of the family have served or are serving time in prison: Beattie Roper is imprisoned in Aylesbury Prison for being accused of having plotted to murder the Prime Minister Lloyd George; Hettie, Beattie's second daughter, is charged with conspiracy with Beattie to murder, but later acquitted; Winnie, Beattie's eldest daughter, William, Beattie's son, and Winnie's boyfriend Mac also suffer imprisonment for their involvement into the antiwar or labor movements.

Based on conveying the importance of the prison image, the novel further "attract(s) the readers' attention" through extremely detailed descriptions of the prison image and highlighting its panoptical features. In the novel, Prior visits Beattie in prison many times, trying to get more information from her mouth, and the image of Panopticon appears in Aylesbury Prison where Beattie is imprisoned:

They went through another set of doors and into a large hall. Prior would have liked some warning of this. He'd expected another corridor, another room. Instead he found himself standing at the bottom of what felt like a pit. The high walls were ringed with three tiers of iron landings, studded by iron doors, linked by iron staircases. In the centre of the pit sat a wardress who, simply by looking up, could observe every door. (Barker 1993: 29)

The description of this prison is surprisingly consistent with the assumption of the Panopticon by Bentham and strikingly conforms to the concept of Panopticism proposed by Michel Foucault:

at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheric building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. (Foucault 2020: 200)

The Panopticon envisaged by Bentham has several obvious architectural features: an annular structure; there is an observation center with a view of the entire building; the peripheric building is divided into a lot of small cells. What Prior sees in Aylesbury Prison fit perfectly with the architectural features of the Panopticon: The high walls “ringed with three tiers of iron landings” show that Aylesbury Prison has an annular structure; the centre of the pit is an observation center with a view of the entire prison; the iron landings “studded by iron doors” hint that the peripheric building is divided into quite a lot of small cells.

In addition to architectural features, the Panopticon also has special optical features. Since each cell has two windows, one facing the windows of the watchtower and the other facing the outside, “by the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery” (Foucault 2020: 200). Aylesbury Prison has similar features. As soon as Prior enters the cell where Beattie is being held, he notices darkness mingled with light and shadow and finds “it seemed very dark, though a small, high, barred window set into the far wall let in a shaft of light”, and “the reflection of the bars was black on the floor, then suddenly faded, as a wisp of cloud drifted across the sun” (Barker 1993: 30–31). This state in which light from the outside of the annular building goes through the cell is suitable for wardresses to observe the situation in the cells from the center of the building, which fully meets the optical requirements of the Panopticon.

It is precisely because of the special annular structure and optical features, the Panopticon greatly facilitates the supervision and observation of inmates, and improves the efficiency of supervision. With the help of the unique location and lights, the supervisors in the centre can easily observe the various rooms of the entire annular building. Besides, “Bentham envisaged not only venetian binds on the windows of the central observation hall, but, on the inside, partitions that intersected the hall at right angles and, in order to pass from one quarter to the other, not doors but zig-zag openings” (Foucault 2020: 201). These designs also help to hide the supervisors in the centre of the building and prevent them from being exposed by the noise or light emitted from the centre. By all these means, the Panopticon becomes “a machine for dissociating the see/being seen dyad”, so that “in the peripheric ring, one is totally seen, without ever seeing; in the central tower, one sees everything without ever being seen” (Foucault 2020: 202).

Aylesbury Prison is just this kind of machine that dissociates “the see/being seen dyad”. Before entering the hall of Aylesbury Prison, Prior passes through numerous corridors and doors, which are designed like Bentham’s “zig-zag openings” to ensure that the wardress at the center of the “pit” can’t be seen by those in the cells, hence achieving the purpose of seeing everything without ever being seen. In addition, in order to make the people in the cells “without ever seeing”, Aylesbury Prison also adds the design of extremely small and high windows which Bentham did not mention. Those “six rows of windows, small and close together”, are “like little piggy eyes”, and

the inmates in the cells totally “can’t see out of the windows” because “they’re too high up for that” (Barker 1993: 28). As a result, Aylesbury Prison achieves the dual purposes of making those in the cells to be seen and unable to see.

### 3 The surveillance function and power mechanism of Aylesbury Prison

In the process of presenting the image of prison, *The Eye in the Door* deliberately highlights the similarities between this image and Bentham’s Panopticon. This intertextuality itself is actually a coding process, during which “the author adds a new reference connotation to the original physical properties of the object” (Wang 2020: 12) and the author’s intention enters the text through the similarities of the two and forms an expectation for the readers to decode. This intertextuality calls the readers to further explore other important information about the Panopticon and to make a deeper reflection beneath the surface. On the surface, the architectural and optical features of the Panopticon provide the building with a surveillance function by “dissociating the see/being seen dyad”, then in a deeper sense, as Foucault once explained, the building also becomes an effective power mechanism because it “assures dissymmetry, disequilibrium, difference” (Foucault 2020: 202).

Foucault mentioned that the main effect of the Panopticon is “to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power” (Foucault 2020: 201). In other words, in this panoptical architecture, the inmate on the one hand knows that someone will be watching his every move from the center, but on the other hand, he “must never know whether he is being looked at at any one moment” (Foucault 2020: 201). In the long run, the inmate will form the awareness of being continuously monitored, and use this conscious awareness to restrain his own behavior. Finally, even in the case of no monitors, he will still automatically follow the requirements of being monitored, and the power mechanism of the prison can be automatically implemented. In terms of operating effects of the surveillance function and power mechanism, Aylesbury Prison in *The Eye in the Door* is even more efficient than Bentham’s Panopticon, because Aylesbury Prison adopts a more stringent and innovative monitoring method, which is the “eye in the door”.

When Prior visits Beattie, he witnesses how grim and unendurable the cell is. However, after a short stay, Prior realizes that the most horrible thing here is not the cell itself, but the carefully painted ‘eye’ around the peephole in the cell door. It is far more frightening than the stinking latrine bucket and the chilling darkness of the cell:

She looked past Prior's shoulder, and he turned to follow her gaze. He found himself looking at an elaborately painted eye. The peephole formed the pupil, but around this someone had taken the time and trouble to paint a veined iris, an eyewhite, eyelashes and a lid. This eye, where no eye should have been, was deeply disturbing to Prior. (Barker 1993: 36)

It is important to note that the painstakingly painted eye in Beattie's cell door is not purely Barker's literary imagination. In the epilogue to *The Eye in the Door*, Barker mentions that Beattie in the novel is based on Alice Wheeldon, a famous British pacifist and anti-war activist during World War I. When Alice Wheeldon was imprisoned during World War I for being convicted of having conspired to murder the Prime Minister Lloyd George by poisoning, the painted eye appeared in the door of the cell where she was serving her sentence – "In the centre of every cell door there was a carved and painted eye, with pupil, eyelashes, and eyebrow. Outside, a sliding disc meant the warders, who were women and who were underpaid and inclined to be bad-tempered and vindictive, could spy on the prisoners without being observed" (Rowbotham 1986: 80). Prior also soon discovers the secret of the eye in Beattie's cell door:

Prior sat back against the wall. He was finding the eye in the door difficult to cope with. Facing it was intolerable, because you could never be sure if there were a human eye at the centre of the painted eye. Sitting with his back to it was worse, since there's nothing more alarming than being watched from behind. And when he sat sideways, he had the irritating impression of somebody perpetually trying to attract his attention. It tired him, and if it tired *him* after less than an hour, what must it have done to Beattie, who'd had to endure it for over a year? (Barker 1993: 40)

If the annular design of the Panopticon and the presence of a surveillance centre create awareness on the inmates of being constantly monitored, it is obvious that the addition of the eye in the cell door at Aylesbury Prison greatly increases the pressure on them. The eye "symbolises the internalisation of ideology, the 'eye' of the super-ego which polices individual behaviour" (Wallace 2005: 224). Because they can never be sure if there is a real human eye at the centre of the painted eye, the inmates have to live in a constant tense state of being watched and are forced to be under the control of visible but uncertain power.

"The Panopticon was also a laboratory; it could be used as a machine to carry out experiments, to alter behaviour, to train or correct individuals" (Foucault 2020: 203). It is precisely because of the continuous working of the surveillance system and the power mechanism that the Panopticon can control and reform the inmates, demonstrating the powerful function of punishment and discipline. In other words, for the Panopticon, the surveillance function is only a surface function. The fundamental purpose of the Panopticon is to establish a disciplinary mechanism to achieve the disciplinary function, for which surveillance is only a tool. "Bentham creatively

extended prison from a building structure originally used only for physical imprisonment to an organ of power implementing psychological and spiritual discipline on prisoners, hence strengthening the efficacy of the authority” (Li 2008: 67). Through physical imprisonment and monitoring of the actions of the inmates, the Panopticon exercises spiritual control over them, so that the inmates can finally be psychologically disciplined and obey the authority.

When Prior first enters Aylesbury Prison, he sees a scene of female prisoners’ returning to their cells:

A bell rang. Behind him the doors opened and a dozen or so women trudged into the room, diverging into two lines as they reached the stairs to the first landing. They wore identical grey smocks that covered them from neck to ankle and blended with the iron grey of the landings, so that the women looked like columns of moving metal. Evidently they were not allowed to speak, and for a while there was no sound except for the clatter of their boots on the stairs, and a chorus of coughs. (Barker 1993: 29)

This horrible scene touches prior and he wonders “what sort of women needed to be kept in a place like this. Prostitutes, thieves, girls who ‘overlaid’ their babies, abortionists who stuck their knitting needles into something vital—did they really need to be here?” (Barker 1993: 29).

In fact, the target for Aylesbury Prison to carry out the disciplinary functions is not the women that Prior mentions. As a spy working for Intelligence in the Ministry of Munitions, Prior clearly knows it. The inmates held in the jail are those who pose a threat to the continuation of the First World War and the fundamental reason for Beattie’s arrest is her anti-war stance. The double effects of Aylesbury Prison’s disciplinary techniques exercised upon the inmates are “a ‘soul’ to be known and a subjection to be maintained” (Foucault 2020: 295), so that the pacifists will give up their anti-war or pacifist ideas.

## 4 The metaphor of British disciplinary society during the First World War

Ernst Cassirer, the German philosopher and cultural semiotician, once said: “an imagery symbol is a reflection of the inner state of human beings and an empirical symbol abstracted from real life.” (Lin 2003: 83) The imagery symbols that the author encodes into the text are ultimately connected with real life. “The author expresses his sense and feeling of the world through imagery symbols, and expands the connotation of the imagery symbols according to various situations” (Wang 2020: 12). The same is true of the imagery symbol of the Panopticon in *The Eye in the*

*Door*, which also has a reference to real life. However, as an imagery symbol, the Panopticon has its own particularity. Through the previous analysis, it can be seen that the Panopticon is not a symbol in the usual sense and what is hidden under the seemingly single imagery symbol is a complex powerful system consistently working. When this system is related to the real life, the Panopticon has the guiding significance for the real society. From a broader social and cultural perspective, the Panopticon in *The Eye in the Door* points to the British society during the First World War when the novel takes place. Through this imagery symbol, the writer criticizes the totalitarian operation mode of the British society during the First World War with the characteristics of the Panopticon.

When Bentham envisaged the Panopticon, he “dreamt of transforming into a network of mechanisms that would be everywhere and always alert, running through society without interruption in space or in time” (Foucault 2020: 209). That is, he wished to apply the Panopticon formula to the whole society and turn it into a universal mode which “programmes, at the level of an elementary and easily transferable mechanism, the basic functioning of a society” (Foucault 2020: 209). In *The Eye in the Door*, the model of the Panopticon is also reflected in many aspects of the British society during the First World War and the whole British society at that time shows the characteristics of surveillance and discipline, hence the imagery symbol of the Panopticon becomes a metaphor for the British society during the First World War.

As necessary means to ensure the functioning of a disciplinary society, ubiquitous surveillance and control techniques fill wartime British society. “In order to be exercised, this power had to be given the instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible. It had to be like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert, a long, hierarchized network” (Foucault 2020: 214). As a spy working for Intelligence, Prior is just part of the surveillance and control mechanism. In the novel, Prior does his best to spy on the anti-war and pacifist activists, among whom many people, including Beattie and her family, are sent to prison because of his betrayals. For Prior, Beattie is his benefactress because “when his mother became ill with suspected tuberculosis, it was to Beattie he’d been sent” and “for almost a year, when he was five or six years old, he’d lived with Beattie and played with her two daughters” (Barker 1993: 56). However, Prior still betrays Beattie with all his tricks. When Prior returns to his hometown and finds Hettie he promises to rescue Beattie and he also convinces Mac to find several other anti-war activists to testify on Beattie’s behalf. But in fact, all these are Prior’s conspiracies. Prior does these merely in order to gain trust and get more intelligence. Eventually Mac and others are all arrested because of Prior’s betrayal.



In the process of betraying Beattie and her family, Prior “develop(s) a split personality” because of his guilt, and “within certain situations, another personality controls his consciousness” (Onega and Ganteau 2011: 27). In the novel, there are often conflicts between Prior and another spy Spragge. Prior speaks vindictively to Spragge, accusing him of framing Beattie. But in fact, the conflicts between Prior and Spragge represent Prior’s innermost struggle between good and evil. Spragge, who often appears in Prior’s fugue state, is actually the darker side of Prior’s self that he does not want to admit:

A little way behind, on the end of the third bench, sat a man with unusually broad shoulders. He looked like Spragge, but it was difficult to tell because he was wearing a hat and facing away from Prior. Prior craned to see the side of his face. It *was* Spragge. Had to be. And yet he wasn’t sure ... He saw himself in his mind’s eye, go up to the man, tap him on the shoulder, wait for him to turn, and the face that turned towards him ... was his own ... He looked again. It might or might not be Spragge, but it certainly looked nothing like *him*. The whole powerful, brutal bulk of the head and shoulders was as different from his own slight build as any two physiques could be, and yet again, as he got up and began to move forward, he felt he was looking at the back of his own head. (Barker 1993: 185)

Therefore, it appears in the novel that the person who denounces Beattie is Spragge, but in fact that person is Prior himself. Prior only escapes his guilt by imagining Spragge’s existence. Prior claims to be a pacifist himself and offers to rescue the conscientious objectors from the detention center and lures Beattie into buying poison for the detention center dogs. But when Beattie buys back the poison, Prior immediately denounces Beattie, citing the poison as evidence that Beattie is trying to murder the Prime Minister. The reason for Prior to do this is for money which is “half on arrest, half on conviction” (Barker 1993: 49).

Spies like Prior throughout the country are just like “thousands of eyes posted everywhere”, form “a long, hierarchized network” (Foucault 2020: 214), and send all kinds of people who are not conducive to the continuation of the war to prison to make them give up their original ideas. After betraying Mac Prior makes a point of meeting him in prison with a so-called “earnestly expressed wish to save an old friend from the shame of pacifism” and a uniform for Mac to return to the battlefield (Barker 1993: 261). The uniform “lying, neatly folded, on the end of the bed” (Barker 1993: 263), along with the smelly bucket and the eye in the door, are forcing Mac to obey. William’s experience is strikingly similar. In chilly January he is “stripped and put in a cell with a stone floor and no glass in the window”, and what is waiting for him is also a uniform. The warders are waiting “to see how long it’ll take” him to give in (Barker 1993: 36).

Prison is one of the main features of a disciplinary society, however, although “in the central position that it occupies, it is not alone, but linked to a whole series of ‘carceral’ mechanisms which seem distinct enough – since they

are intended to alleviate pain, to cure, to comfort – but which all tend, like the prison, to exercise a power of normalization” (Foucault 2020: 308). According to Foucault, these mechanisms also include the hospital, “the technico-medical model of cure and normalization” (Foucault 2020: 248). Apart from warders, doctors, psychiatrists, and psychologists can all become the implementers of disciplinary duties (Foucault 2020: 11), among whom psychiatrists are especially “adviser(s) on punishment” (Foucault 2020: 22).

In *The Eye in the Door*, Rivers, a man with triple identities of doctor, psychiatrist, and psychologist, is another practitioner of disciplinary duty. Unlike Prior, Rivers reflects the role of military medicine in the disciplinary society of wartime Britain. In the previous novel *Regeneration*, the officers and soldiers who refuse to continue fighting in the First World War, whether genuinely mentally ill or with anti-war sentiments, are all sent to Craiglockhart War Hospital to be treated by Rivers. After Rivers’ treatment, countless soldiers who have been “cured” of their anti-war sentiments are sent back to the battlefield. In *The Eye in the Door* Rivers returns to Empire Hospital in London, but his duty is still to treat mental illnesses like shell-shock for soldiers and remove their “disguised male protest” (Showalter 1987: 172). When Rivers hears that the anti-war poet Siegfried Sassoon, whom he has cured of “shell-shock”, mentions going to Sheffield to join the anti-war activist Edward Carpenter, he realizes at once that “he was faced with the task of putting obstacles in the way of yet another hare-brained scheme, because this was another protest, smaller, more private, less hopeful, than his public declaration had been, but still a protest” (Barker 1993: 260). Immediately Rivers warns Sassoon in a stern tone to “face the fact”, put on the tunic, and “spend the rest of the war in it” (Barker 1993: 261). At Rivers’ coaxing, Sassoon eventually puts on the uniform, which demonstrates the success of the disciplinary function of military medicine that Rivers represents.

## 5 Conclusions

In *The Eye in the Door*, Pat Barker portrays the image of the Panopticon represented by Aylesbury Prison, and uses this image as a metaphor for the British society during the First World War, revealing the disciplinary characteristics and totalitarian tendency of the British society in the later period of the First World War. The British society at that time formed a hierarchical surveillance system from the top down. In addition to anti-war activists and pacifists, the system also spied on and persecuted the labor movement and the gay community. The profound reason for this is that all these groups and movements threatened the continuation of the war. Therefore, controlling these groups and “suppressing

their feelings and sexual desires will cause them to divert their enormous energy and passion into overseas wars, industrial production, and political movements, so as to achieve the efficient and safe operation of the state apparatus” (Li 2008: 67). Sharon Monteith once commented that Pat Barker’s “own intervention into the subject provides the most sustained and challenging late-twentieth-century perspective on the First World War in literature” (Monteith 2002: 55). It is also the case with *The Eye in the Door*. Although this novel does not include any war scenes, it adopts a different perspective to describe the people in the rear during the First World War who are seldom noticed, and inspires people to think about the causes of the war, which is precisely the reason why this novel becomes an excellent novel about the First World War.

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