

Multiple Endings in *Copenhagen*

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Abstract

The characters in *Copenhagen* make three attempts of trying finding out the truth of the meeting and supply a lot of possibilities. However, no possibility is pinned down. The result is the multi-ended play, which gives the reader enough space to think about the event. This paper aims to explore the well-known play and tries to find out how its multiple endings contribute to a new version of the 1941 mysterious meeting.

Key words: *Copenhagen*; 1941 meeting; Multiple endings

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INTRODUCTION

Copenhagen, written by Michael Frayn, has been performed in America and many European countries ever since its publication in 1998. This widely praised play has won a lot of prizes, including the Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award. Thus, it was called the Hollywood hit in the theoretical circle. This play arouses many discussions from such academic circles as science, history, literature, etc. It also has great influences in China. Ge Ge has translated it into Chinese and its performance, directed by Wang Xiaoying of the National Theatre Company, has been successfully shown for 100 times around China to celebrate the 100th anniversary of Chinese Modern Drama.

The play is based on the famous 1941 meeting between two famous scientists: Bohr and Heisenberg. Frayn creates a different version of this event. The characters in the play make three attempts of trying finding out the truth of the meeting and supply a lot of possibilities. However, no possibility is pinned down. The result is the multi-ended play, which give the reader enough space to think about the event.

From the perspective of postmodernism this paper aims to explore the well-known play and tries to find out how its multiple endings contribute to a new version of the 1941 mysterious meeting.

1. PRESENTATION OF MULTIPLE ENDINGS IN *COPENHAGEN*

1.1 Beginning Of The Play

The play begins with,

Margrethe: But why?

Bohr: You are still thinking about it?

The opening remarks center on the 1941 meeting directly. From here we can tell that the couple has been always obsessed with the question even after their death. Here is the evidence: Margrethe does not mention the subject because they both know; Bohr uses “it”. Both of them do not mention the 1941 meeting directly, but they both are very clear what the other refers to. Some questions lingering like ghosts look for the answers even after their death. The 1941 meeting is such a question for the Bohrs and Heisenberg. This question was explained many times to Bohr himself, and Margrethe; to interrogators and intelligence officer; to journalists and historians and etc. The more it has been explained, the deeper the uncertainty has become. In addition, it is also an important question. We can see from Margrethe “And from those two heads the future will emerge. Which cities

will be destroyed, and which survive. Who will die, and who will live. Which world will go down the obliteration, and which will triumph?" (Frayn, 1998, p.54). Since the uneasiness of the three spirits they are happy to make one more attempt. The situation has changed because they are all dead and gone and no one can be hurt, now no one can be betrayed. In such circumstances, it seems that they can find out the truth of the 1941 meeting. Starting in such good beginning and seemingly advantageous circumstances, the reader seems to have good reason to discover the mysterious event.

1.2 Inquiry Of The Real Facts Of The 1941 Meeting

Following the straightforward beginning, the three characters make three attempts to find out the truth, which are signaled by Heisenberg's knocking the door of the Bohrs.

1.2.1 The First Experiment Of Inquiry Starts From Page 12 To Page 53

The three characters briefly recall the great cooperation between Bohr and Heisenberg, the friendship and the unhappiness between them. After that, they go back to the main question, "so why is he coming?" Their thought-experiment begins.

Heisenberg: I crunch over the familiar gravel to the Bohr's front door, and tug at the familiar bell-pull. Fear, yes. And another sensation, that's become painfully familiar over the past year. A mixture of self-importance and sheer helpless absurdity—that of all the 2,000 million people in the world, I'm the one who's been charged with this impossible responsibility....The heavy door swings open (Frayn, 1998, pp.12, 13).

Bohr: My dear Heisenberg!
Heisenberg: My dear Bohr!
Bohr: Come in, come in...

What did they say during the talk? A lot of people want to know even until now. Bohr thinks perhaps Heisenberg comes to borrow the cyclotron which German has not got (Frayn, 1998, p.17). Heisenberg wants to ask about the development of Bohr's study about fission and also that of the Allies' scientists (Frayn, 1998, pp.18, 19). To invite Bohr to take part in the cocktail parties at the Germany Embassy to give lectures and attend more social contacts. (Frayn, 1998, pp.20-21). In this part when they suggest a walk they recall from their first meeting in 1922 to 1941. This stroll lasted about 10 minutes and they came back unhappily, which made Margrethe recollected the 1927's worst moments between Bohr and Heisenberg. Heisenberg says there's no mystery about the talk. He just wants to know "if as a physicist one had the moral right to work on the practical exploitation of atomic energy" (Frayn, 1998, p.35). But Bohr says he does not recall. Heisenberg says at that time Bohr became alarmed and jumped to the conclusion that Heisenberg himself was trying to provide Hitler with nuclear weapons. But Heisenberg said they were trying to build a reactor to produce

power, to generate electricity, to drive ships. According to Heisenberg if they could build bombs they could build a reactor, which is what had brought Heisenberg to Copenhagen (Frayn, 1998, p.36). Bohr thought he grasped the central point that Heisenberg had the possibility of supplying Hitler with nuclear weapons (Frayn, 1998, p.38). Heisenberg told Bohr that Bohr grasped four different yet wrong central points, "Heisenberg had tried to pick Bohr's brains about fission, Heisenberg'd asked what Bohr knew about the Allied nuclear programmer, Heisenberg was hoping to persuade Bohr that there was no German program, Heisenberg'd tried to recruit Bohr to work on the program (Frayn, 1998, p.38).

Because of disagreement with each other they plan to start to experiment all over again (Frayn, 1998, p.38). This time Bohr emphasizes in such condition "No Gestapo in the shadows this time. No British intelligence officer this time. No one watching us at all." They explain the event in plain language for Margrethe, who does not know physics, to understand. Bohr says "Plain language. All right, so here we are, walking along the street once more. And this time I'm absolutely calm, I'm listening intently..." (Frayn, 1998, p.38). This time Heisenberg stands for the German scientists to talk and discuss with Bohr—the spiritual father (Frayn, 1998, p.39). But Margrethe says Heisenberg wants Bohr to give him an absolution, about which Heisenberg is not sure. Heisenberg thinks the government will ask him whether it's worth committing huge resources to produce nuclear weapons and whether there is any hope of producing the weapons in time for them to be used. Therefore the government will have to come to Bohr and Heisenberg, who are the ones who will have to advise them whether to go ahead or not. Therefore, the decision will be in Bohr and Heisenberg's hands (Frayn, 1998, p.41). It is a hard choice for Heisenberg for he has to decide what to tell the government for if Heisenberg tells the government how difficult it is to produce the weapons, thus the German will fail because they do not know what the Allies are doing. (Frayn, 1998, p.41). Therefore, Heisenberg also wants to know the Allied nuclear program from Bohr, who is inclined most to have contacts with Allies (Frayn, 1998, p.42). Heisenberg thinks he is the one who has to decide for his country if the Allies are building a bomb. He thinks it is wrong to think one loves one's country less because it happened to be in the wrong. German is his beloved mother. He does not want his country suffer again like after the failure of the First World War. (Copenhagen, 1998, p.42) Therefore, he wants to get some hint or clue of the Allied nuclear program which targets German at risk of betraying his own motherland (Frayn, 1998, p.42). Bohr tells Heisenberg that because of the fear that German is working on the nuclear weapons the Allies also work on the nuclear program. And Heisenberg hopes both of them and the Allies can

stop producing nuclear weapons because the choice is in scientists' hands, which is a microscopically fine thread of possibility, a wild impossibility for Heisenberg (Frayn, 1998, p.44). Heisenberg also condemns what the Allies do for they dropped the bomb on anyone who was in reach. On old men and women in the street, on mothers and their children. He metaphorically states that the scientists play happily with toy cap-pistol. Then someone else picks up and pulls the trigger... and all at once there's blood everywhere and people screaming because it wasn't a toy at all... (Frayn, 1998, p.46). And if the Allies had produced the bomb in time the target would be the Germans (Frayn, 1998, p.43). Margrethe says Heisenberg wants to transfer his burden to Bohr (Frayn, 1998, p.47). However, Heisenberg and his colleague were madly going on the reactor and expecting to achieve the first self-sustaining chain reaction in the world, which is inconsistent with the previous talk that he does not want to build nuclear bombs (Frayn, 1998, p.51).

Margrethe says "Look at him. He's lost. He's like a lost child. He's shown off, he's been brave, and he's been cowardly. He's done wrong, he's done right. And now the evening's come, and all he wants is to go home, and he's lost." (Frayn, 1998, p.52). Heisenberg himself lost his way. So how can he tell us what really happened during that night. Thus the first experiment ends. The event becomes more mysterious now. The author does not end the story here because Bohr says "Tell us again. Another draft of the paper. And this time we shall be right. This time we shall understand." (Frayn, 1998, p.53). "After all, the workings of the atom were difficult to explain. We made many attempts. Each time we tried they became more obscure. We got there in the end, however. So another draft, another draft."

1.2.2 The Second Experiment Starts From Page 54 to Page 88

Therefore, the second experiment begins with Heisenberg's monologue similarly with the first experiment.

Heisenberg: Why did I come? And once again I go through that evening in 1941. I crunch over the familiar gravel, and tug at the familiar bell-pull. What's in my head? Fear, certainly. And the absurd and horrible importance of someone bearing bad news. But...yes... something else as well. Here it comes again. ...I can almost see its face. Something good. Something bright and eager and hopeful.

Bohr: I open the door...
Bohr: My dear Heisenberg!
Heisenberg: My dear Bohr!
Bohr: Come in, come in...

Margrethe points out "If it's Heisenberg at the center of the universe, then the one bit of the universe that he can't see is Heisenberg. So it's no good asking him why he came to Copenhagen in 1941. He doesn't know" (Frayn, 1998, p.74). Then by using the theory

of Complementarity, Margrethe thinks "If you're doing something you have to concentrate on, you can't also be thinking about doing it, and if you're thinking about doing it then you can't actually be doing it." Thus if Heisenberg is doing he can't think why he does so (Frayn, 1998, p.74). Then, Margrethe thinks Heisenberg's coming because he wants to show himself off to them. In 1924, Heisenberg was a humble assistant lecturer from a humiliated nation, grateful to have a job. Now he is back in triumph—the leading scientist in a nation that's conquered most of Europe (Frayn, 1998, p.76). He is anxious to let the Bohrs know that he's in charge of some vital piece of secret research and he's preserved a lofty moral independence so famously and successfully that he is in a moral dilemma (Frayn, 1998, p.77). She also believes that Heisenberg is going to go back to German and continue doing precisely what he was doing before, whatever Bohr tells him. Heisenberg himself admits this point because he does not want to give up such a wonderful opportunity for research even if he can avoid it (Frayn, 1998, p.77). Margrethe believes that Heisenberg wants to rebuild theoretical physics as soon as the war is over. She also believes that Heisenberg does not tell Speer every detail of reactor because he is afraid of the failure of delivering the bombs once the government invest more money on it (Frayn, 1998, p.77). Heisenberg holds his own view "I came to Copenhagen simply because I did think of it. A million things we might do or things might not do every day. A million decisions that make themselves." (Frayn, 1998, p.79). Sometimes there is no reason for why you do something because you just think of it. The ceaseless inquiry makes Heisenberg out of mind. He even asks Bohr "Why didn't you kill me, murder me?" (Frayn, 1998, p.79). The reason is interpreted by the Complementarity theory for he is both the enemy and friend for the Bohrs. He thinks himself having a set of obligations to the world and the other sets to his country, which never to be reconciled (Frayn, 1998, p.80). When Margrethe says Heisenberg did not build bomb because he could not. He even did not understand physics. He did not understand the crucial difference between a reactor and a bomb. (Frayn, 1998, pp.81-82). Heisenberg says he understood very clearly and did tell others with evidence and witness. Bohr says Heisenberg could have done bombs without ever building the reactor (Frayn, 1998, p.86). His miscalculation of the critical mass, which was the most important to establish the chain-reaction, was due to his unwillingness to build bomb like Bohr. (Frayn, 1998, p.88). His miscalculation was twenty times over to save a city (Frayn, 1998, p.86).

After two experiments, the author has not given the definite answer to the 1941 event. The event becomes more mysterious. Heisenberg asks himself "Why did I come to Copenhagen? Yes, why did I come...?" Bohr suggests "one more draft, yes? One final draft!"

1.2.3 The Third Experiment Starts From Page 88 to Page 91

With the familiar scene, the third experiment begins.

Heisenberg: And once again I crunch over the familiar gravel to the Bohr's front door, and tug at the familiar bell-pull. Why have I come? I know perfectly well. Know so well that I've no need to ask myself. Until once again the heavy front door opens.

...

Bohr: My dear Heisenberg!

Heisenberg: My dear Bohr!

Bohr: Come in, come in ...

This time, at first Bohr says Heisenberg has to be observed and specified like particles. Heisenberg says at once the clear purposes inside his head lose all definite shape (Frayn, 1998, p.88). Heisenberg emphasizes the difficulty of seeing what's in front of one's eyes. The present endlessly dissolves into the past (Frayn, 1998, p.88). This time both Bohr and Heisenberg acknowledge that there is someone missing from this room? He can see both Bohr and Margrethe. But he does not see himself. However, it is this hidden one who has to decide two million people's fate in the world (Frayn, 1998, p.89). In this part, Margrethe compares Heisenberg as flying particle. "The flying particle wanders the darkness, no one knows where. It's here, it's there, and it's everywhere and nowhere" (Frayn, 1998, p.90). Both cases suggest the incapability of finding out the motive of Heisenberg's coming. In this part, as the moments of collision begins it's over (Frayn, 1998, p.90). According to Margrethe "That was the last and greatest demand that Heisenberg made on his friendship with you. To be understood when he could not understand himself. And that was the last and greatest act of friendship for Heisenberg that you performed in return. To leave him misunderstood" (Frayn, 1998, p.91).

2. AUTHOR ENDS THE PLAY IN THE FOLLOWING WAY.

Margrethe concludes "Anyway, it was the end of the story" (Frayn, 1998, p.91). It is a quite new way to end a story because the character says so. The last words said by Heisenberg reinforce the uncertainty of finding the truth of the event. "By some event that will never quite be located or defined. By that final core of uncertainty of things." It seems impossible to find out the truth of the event.

After the three attempts to find out the truth of the whole event, the author has supplied various possibilities of the event. He does not give the definite answer finally. Thus he leaves the event even wider open.

3. NARRATIVE MODEL OF COPENHAGEN

From the above analysis, we can conclude the narrative model of this play in such way. "But why?" leads directly to 1941 meeting. Then the three characters make three attempts of the possibilities of the meeting. Each character from their own perspective gives some possible answers of the event, which are quite different from others. In such way, they cannot agree on each other. However, the controversy of the three characters gives enough space for them to debate on the issue again and again. In this play there are three times altogether. In the process of finding out of truth, the author skillfully uses the "Uncertainty Principle" to add the inability of finding out the real facts of 1941. The seemingly compelling end delivered by one character of the play—Margrethe, she says "Anyway, it was the end of the story" (Frayn, 1998, p.91). *Copenhagen* ends in such way though the consensus of the event has not been reached. In this sense, we can say that the author does not resolve the conflict of the 1941 meeting. The play is lack of closure, or we can say that it has multiple endings for each possibilities of the event can be regarded as one ending of the play. The reason of the multiple endings of the play comes from the following aspects, which is consistent with the postmodernist characteristics in several aspects.

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