

Bulgakov's Master and Margarita: Why Can't Critics Agree on What it Means?

Olya Gurevich, UC Berkeley, olya@socrates.berkeley.edu

1203 Dwinelle Hall, University of California at Berkeley, Berkeley, CA 94720-2650

Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* has been a source of contention for literary critics since its first publication in 1967. Containing brilliant satire, phantasmagoria, and historical prose, the novel is full of parallels and allusions that call out for analysis. This paper presents a cognitive analysis of the various mappings in the novel using frame semantics [Fillmore 1982] and the theory of mental spaces [Fauconnier 1997].

Most important are the parallels between the three worlds described in the novel: the "real" world of 1920-30's Moscow, the "phantasmagoria" world of Woland (Satan) and his retinue, and the historical world of Pontius Pilate and his prisoner Yeshua Ha-Notsri (the historical Jesus). These worlds contain somewhat similar characters, and events that transpire in them are also somewhat parallel. A critic's (and any reader's) natural reaction is to draw these parallels by mapping the three worlds onto each other, and to draw inferences based on the shared structures of the worlds. However, the mappings between characters and events prove to be much more complex than one might expect. Allusions to biblical texts, ancient and Gothic mythology, and other works of literature (such as Goethe's *Faust*) intervene and complicate the structure of the 'parallel' worlds. Different critics have come to drastically different conclusions about which characters in one world correspond to which characters in the other worlds.

This paper shows the source of these disagreements using the theory of mental spaces. I argue that the three worlds (three spaces) are structured by similar frames [Fillmore 1982], but the overall structure of each world is much richer, and multiple common structures can be inferred from the three different worlds. These different structures lead to inconsistent mappings of participants from one space to another. Critics have taken different characteristics of the participants to be important for the mappings (e.g. appearance, name, function, relationship to other participants), and as a result have drawn different parallels between the three worlds.

While the parallels between the three worlds are obvious, they mismatch in some very important respects. The three worlds are based on different spatial orientations. In the historical narrative and the phantasmagoria, the spatial metaphors work as expected: Bulgakov uses height to symbolize power. Quite literally, people who reside on top of Jerusalem's hills (Pontius Pilate in Herod's palace, the High Priest Caiaphas in the Temple of Solomon, and at the end Jesus on Golgotha) have power over the city. In the phantasmagoria, the only characters that can fly are those associated with Woland and the powers of the evil. Moreover, flying for them is a way to escape the grips of Soviet society, and for Margarita – to become invisible to her fellow citizens. We, the readers, understand this symbolism so easily because of the basic metaphor POWER IS UP [Lakoff and Johnson 1980].

However, in the Moscow world the spatial associations are flipped. The Master's refuge is in the basement of a house, and Margarita has to descend from her unhappy tower to get to it. The Master is frightened of authority and of ascending. In fact, he suffers for emerging back *up* into the world and trying to publish his novel. Only Woland's arrival restores the natural mappings. Woland gives the Master and Margarita the ability to fly, and to fly away – but they have to die before they can escape the inverted spatial orientation.

The three 'parallel' worlds of *The Master and Margarita* mismatch in important aspects, and these mismatches are very symbolic. The contribution of a linguistic analysis of the mappings and spatial metaphors is to show that these parallels and mismatches have to be considered as a whole, and no one interpretation can fully capture the meaning of the novel.

References:

- Fauconnier, Gilles. 1997. *Mappings in Thought and Language*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Fillmore, Charles. 1982. Frame Semantics. In *Linguistics in the Morning Calm*. Seoul: Hanshin, 111-137
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1980. *Metaphors We Live By*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Sweetser, Eve. 2001. 'The suburbs of your good pleasure:' Co-Orientation of metaphorical mappings in literary and everyday language. In *Zeitschrift für Semiotik*.