



**Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita  
Why Can't Critics Agree on What It Means?<sup>1</sup>**  
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## Introduction

Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* has been a source of contention for literary critics since its first publication in 1967<sup>2</sup>. Containing brilliant satire, phantasmagoria, and historical prose, the novel is full of parallels and allusions that call out for analysis. 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 drawing 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.

In this paper, I would like to show the source of these disagreements, using the theory of mental spaces [Fauconnier 1997]. I will claim that the three worlds (three spaces) are structured by similar frames [in the sense of Fillmore 1982], but the overall structure of each world is more complex than the generic frame, 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. It is a natural expectation to be able to derive the same structure from all three worlds, and sometimes critics have stretched the similarities in order to achieve perfect symmetry.

While the parallels between the three worlds are obvious, they mismatch in some very important respects. Much of the hierarchical structure of Pilate's world is not preserved in the Moscow world. The three worlds are based on different spatial orientations, one of the most basic domains of human cognition. In the historical narrative and the phantasmagoria, the spatial metaphors work as we expect them to. 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 [Ch. 21]<sup>3</sup>. 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

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Eve Sweetser, Eric Naiman, and David Danaher for their insightful and detailed comments. All errors are, of course, my own.

<sup>2</sup> The novel was completed in the 1930s, but for political reasons could only be published after Bulgakov's death. Even then, the 1967 edition was strictly censored, and the full text of the novel did not appear until several years later.

<sup>3</sup> From here on, I will refer to the novel by chapter number.

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 historical narrative and the phantasmagoria do not quite match in the spatial orientations, either. In Yershalaim, it is the power of good (Yeshua) that ascends to heaven, and in Judeo-Christian theology evil should reside below the earth. However, Woland and his retinue, even though they represent evil, can fly and take the Master and Margarita high above the city to their refuge. In the Moscow world, the evil has the right to ascend.

The three worlds of *The Master and Margarita*, while parallel in evident and deliberate ways, also mismatch in important aspects, and much can be said about the symbolism of these mismatches. The contribution of a linguistic analysis of the mappings and spatial metaphors is to show that these parallels and mismatches have to be compared to each other, not just analyzed separately, and no one interpretation can fully capture the meaning of the novel.

The rest of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 looks at various proposed mappings between worlds and presents mental-spaces analyses of these mappings. Section 3 summarizes the discussion of disagreements between critics. Section 4 analyzes the use of space in the novel, and Section 5 presents the overall conclusions.

### **The worlds and mappings between them**

Table 1 lists the characters of the three worlds and the Faust narrative that critics most often use to map the worlds onto each other. The order in which the characters are listed does not necessarily correspond to the order of the mappings. For the historical narrative, I am using the Aramaic names as they are cited in the novel.

**Table 1 – Characters in the parallel worlds.**

<b>1930s Moscow</b>	<b>Phantasmagoria</b>	<b>Historical narrative</b>	<b>Goethe's Faust</b>
Professor Stravinsky	Woland	Pontius Pilate	Mephistopheles
Dr. Fedor Vasilievich	Fagot-Koroviev	Afranius	Faust
Archibald Archibaldovich	Azazello	Centurion Mark Rat-killer	Helena
Police dog Tuz Buben	Cat Behemoth	Dog Banga	Marguerite
Natasha, Margarita's servant	Gella, the witch	Niza, Afranius's friend	Gretchen
Pseudo-foreigner in the Torgsin store	M. A. Berlioz	Caiaphas, the High Priest	The Phorkiades
Aloisiy Mogarych	Baron Maigel	Yuda from Kiriath	Chiron, the doctor

Poet Ryukhin	Poet Ivan Bezdomnyi	Levi Matvei
The Master	The Master	Yeshua Ha-Notsri
Margarita	Margarita	Yershalaim crowd
Crowd at the Variety Theatre	Guests at Woland's ball	

Based on different textual clues, these worlds have been mapped onto each other in different ways. In Section 2.1, I look at mappings between the three worlds apparent in the novel. Section 2.2 introduces the mental space theory and presents an analysis of the world mappings. Section 2.3 analyzes the final scene of the novel, where the three worlds come together. Section 2.4 surveys attested mappings between the novel and Goethe's Faust. Section 2.5 is an overview of mappings to real people, i.e. the search for real-world prototypes for the novel's characters. Section 2.6 goes over several interpretations of the novel as an allegory, where the source of the allegory provides some expected structure for the novel. Section 2.7 is a survey of the theological interpretations of the novel, where the roles of the main characters differ from one interpretation to another. Finally, section 2.8 goes over some unified readings for the novel which, once again, structure the worlds and assign certain roles to the characters.

### *Mappings between the three worlds*

There have been multiple attempts to identify characters from the three levels of the novel with each other. While there are evident parallels between them, not all the mappings are obvious, and critics disagree on which ones are correct. Sokolov [1991] presents the most explicit set of mappings. He identifies seven "triads" (characters with equivalents in all three worlds), one "diad" and one "monad." For most of the triads, the similarities are pair-wise rather than between all three characters. The triads are as follows:

1) Pontius Pilate – Woland – Professor Stravinsky. These characters, to some extent, control the events in their respective worlds. While Pilate has real control over the lives of people in Yershalaim, Woland is really executing the will of God, and Stravinsky has very temporary control over the mental state of his patients. In other words, the world of phantasmagoria is a sort of parody of Pilate's world, and the description of 1930's Moscow is an even more ruthless parody. The "lowering" of significance from the Yershalaim world to the Moscow world, according to Sokolov, is evident in the other triads as well.

Pontius Pilate tries to save Yeshua but succumbs to cowardice, and only gains salvation after death. Woland saves the Master and Margarita, but only by killing them. Stravinsky can save his patients by offering them the false peace of the asylum. There are surface similarities, too. All three men are in their forties, clean-shaven and have penetrating eyes. In an earlier version of the novel, Woland periodically turned into Pilate in the Moscow scenes. Ivan Bezdomny notices that Stravinsky and Pilate look alike.

2) Afranius – Fagot-Koroviev – Doctor Fedor Vasilievich, Stravinsky's first deputy. Beside the functional similarity, connections between these characters are mostly pair-wise. Afranius and Fagot have small cunning eyes. Both of them distribute money on behalf of their superiors (Pilate and Woland, respectively). The doctor and Afranius both sit on tall stools in some scenes of the novel. Koroviev wears a pince-nez and a mustache, the doctor has a beard and wears glasses. Some of these connections seem stretched.

3) Centurion Mark Rat-Killer – Azazello – Archibald Archibaldovich, director of the writers' restaurant. The centurion and Azazello both fulfill executioner's roles for their masters. Archibald Archibaldovich transforms into a cruel pirate in the narrator's imagination (but only in imagination). There are also some surface similarities – wide shoulders, belts with weapons. Archibald Archibaldovich helps find Stravinsky's future patients, indirectly helping him. Once again, some of these parallels are stretched, but they create a perfectly symmetrical structure for Sokolov.

4) Pilate's dog Banga – Behemoth the cat – the police dog Tuz Buben ('Ace of Diamonds'). All three are exceptionally smart animals. Here, the progression from the serious to the parodied is evident: the noble Banga corresponds to the mischievous Behemoth and the simple dog Tuz Buben.

5) Niza, Afranius's double agent – Gella, Woland's servant – Natasha, Margarita's servant. Niza and Gella lure Yuda and the traitor Baron Maigel, respectively, into traps where they are killed. Gella and Natasha are both deft servants, and Natasha eventually becomes a witch. According to Sokolov, both Niza and Gella are not among the main subordinates of Pilate and Woland. Rather, Niza obeys Afranius, and Gella seems to take orders from Fagot. It is not clear what Natasha's connection to Stravinsky is, but otherwise her character fits into the parallel structure that Sokolov wants to create.

The first five triads correspond to the leaders and their retinues. Other triads are:

6) High Priest Caiaphas – Mikhail Berlioz, head of the MASSOLIT organization – the pseudo-foreigner in the Torgsin store. Caiaphas and Berlioz occupy positions of power, and both try to destroy Jesus – Caiaphas by insisting on Yeshua's execution, and Berlioz by asserting that Jesus did not exist. Berlioz and the pseudo-foreigner look alike. Berlioz is also, in a way, a pseudo-foreigner – he has the same name as a famous French composer. For all three, a catastrophic future is foretold: Pilate tells Caiaphas that his temple and his people will be destroyed; Woland predicts Berlioz's death under a tram; and the pseudo-foreigner falls into a barrel of salted herring (as a parody).

7) Yuda from Kiriath (Judas) – Baron Maigel – Aloisy Mogarych, the Master's friend. This is a triad of traitors or would-be traitors (in the case of Baron Maigel). The more serious characters, Yuda and Maigel, are killed by Pilate's and Woland's agents. Mogarych is punished, but not so severely. This again emphasizes the parody nature of the Moscow world. In fact, Mogarych easily gets out of his punishment and goes on to become a high-ranking official, as if to point out the low morality of the Soviet world.

8) Levi Matvei (Matthew the evangelist) – the poet Ivan Bezdomny – poet Riukhin. Levi Matthew is the disciple of Yeshua, Bezdomny is the Master's disciple, but it is not clear who Riukhin's teacher is. All three have flaws: Levi Matthew, in Yeshua's words, "records incorrectly", he transforms the peaceful teachings into a dogmatic religion. Bezdomny, in Sokolov's interpretation, in the end forgets what he's learned, and is only tormented by the moon once a year for reasons he does not understand. Riukhin tries to stop writing bad poetry, but fails, learning nothing.

Sokolov also identifies the Master with Yeshua, but since the Master acts in both the 'everyday' world and the phantasmagoria, there is no third equivalent. This connection is a diad. He also does not find equivalents to Margarita's character, and calls it a "monad" that brings the whole novel together. Margarita is a symbol of love and mercy, the emotions Bulgakov considered to be the foundation of humanity.

It is clear that Sokolov wants the three worlds to be exactly parallel and mapped perfectly onto each other. In his quest to find parallels, he sometimes stretches the similarities between the characters. This desire to find regular structure is a natural

reaction to a complicated work of literature, and many other critics have fallen prey to it.

### *Mental Spaces Theory*

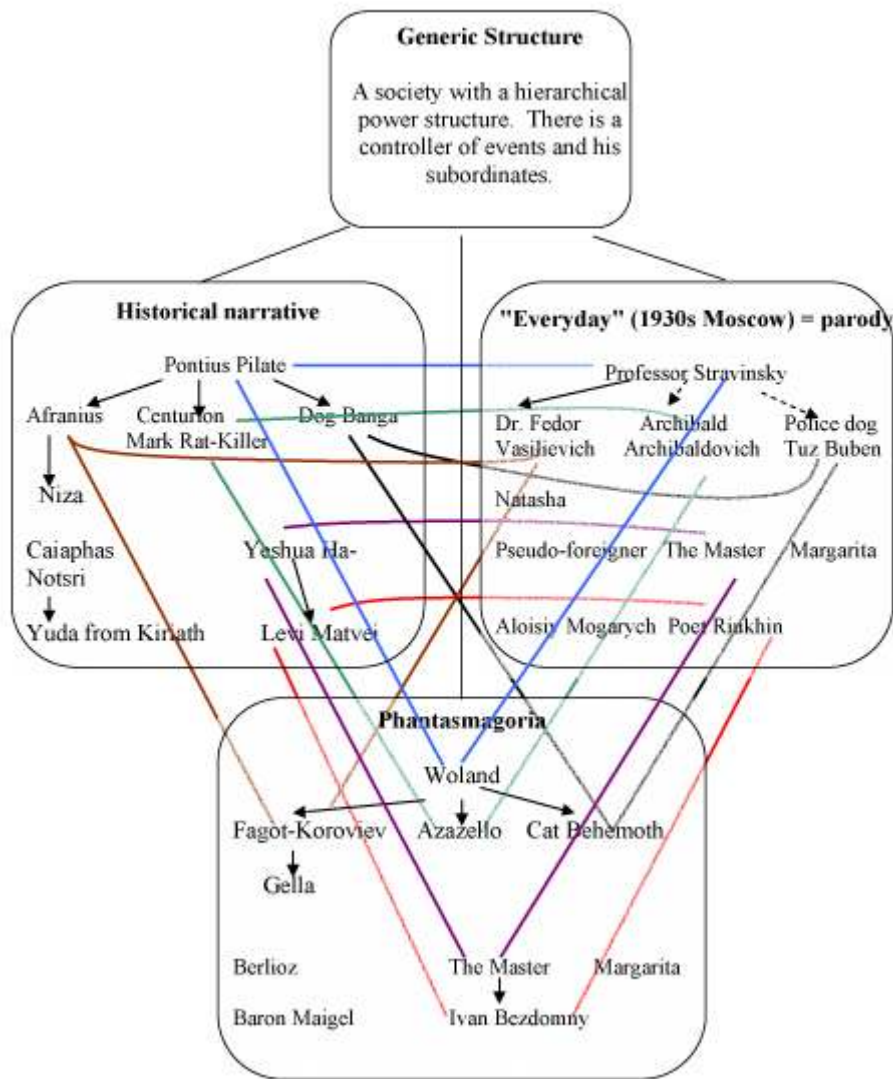
The theory of mental spaces [Fauconnier 1997] provides a convenient way to analyze these mappings and to see why it is so natural for us to seek perfect symmetry.

Mental spaces are partial structures that are dynamically created when we think and talk. They are somewhat similar to possible worlds, without the philosophical implications of whether or not these possible worlds exist. The claim is that mental spaces represent psychological reality and are essential for constructing meaning, both in everyday situations and in fictionalized contexts. Mental spaces have been used to analyze descriptions of past and future [Fauconnier 1997], conditional and counterfactual constructions [Sweetser 1996, Fauconnier 1996], literary works [Sweetser in press], and other questions.

Each mental space is structured by a frame with roles that stand in structural relationships with each other. For instance, when we say Liz thinks Richard is wonderful, we create a space for Liz's belief which contains the role Richard and the statement "Richard is wonderful." When more than one mental space is constructed at the same time, we can abstract common structure, or generic structure, from them. The generic structure includes only information that is not contradicted by either space. The sorts of roles and structures that end up in the generic structure guide the construction of blends, or combinations of two (or more) mental spaces. A blend is itself a mental space which inherits some characteristics from each of the spaces, but may also have a structure of its own (known as emergent structure). There is evidence that conceptual blending is the basic mechanism behind the human capacity to imagine and to construct meaning [Fauconnier and Turner 2002].

To go back to Sokolov's mappings, we can think of each of the three worlds as a mental space, structured by a frame in which characters fulfill certain roles and have specified relations to each other. For example, in the historical narrative Pontius Pilate is the controller of events, and the head of a strict hierarchy to which his subordinates belong. His subordinates, in turn, have specific roles (first mate = Afranius, executioner = the Centurion, true friend = Banga, etc.) In a similar way, the controller of events in the phantasmagoria is Woland, and he, too, has a hierarchically organized entourage. Once the reader notices these parallels between the two worlds, it is natural to expect more parallels, and similar event structures. In a text as rich with clues as *The Master and Margarita*, finding such parallels is not difficult, and sometimes critics stretch surface similarities to achieve perfect symmetry between the different frames. Figure 1 is a mental spaces diagram of Sokolov's mappings. It will give us a way to talk about the mappings in comparison with the other critics' findings. In the diagram, hierarchical relations between characters in each frame are indicated by arrows (e.g. Afranius is Pilate's subordinate). The dotted arrows indicate hierarchical relations that are very indirect. Parallel characters in the three frames are connected by lines. For the sake of visual clarity, not all of the connections are drawn explicitly.

Figure 1 - Sokolov's mappings of the three worlds



We can see that even where the individual characters have enough surface similarities to be mapped onto each other, the structure connecting them is often missing in the phantasmagoria world, and especially in the 1930s Moscow world. For example, while Yuda of Kiriath is an agent of the priest Caiaphas, Aloisii Mogarych has no relation to Berlioz; moreover, while Berlioz, as Sokolov claims, is the enemy of Jesus, Aloisii betrays the Master. In other words, these mappings don't work quite as well as Sokolov would like them to.

Other critics have differed from Sokolov on specific mappings. The textual clues in the novel are often ambiguous, and critics have picked out different ones, resulting in different mappings. Kanchukov [1991] talks about the metaphysical implications of the novel, rather than the surface similarities between the characters. He considers what Levi Matvei said about the Master: "He does not deserve light, he deserves peace." [Ch. 29]. In order to understand why the Master did not deserve light, Kanchukov compares him with the characters who did deserve light – Yeshua and Levi Matvei. Failing to find illuminating parallels between the Master and Yeshua, Kanchukov creates the mapping Levi Matvei – the Master. Both men are about forty years old, and both are writers – Levi records what Yeshua says (although incorrectly), and the Master writes a novel. Kanchukov sees The Master and Margarita as two stories about simple people who

changed their lives by a single deed – Levi by becoming Yeshua's disciple, and the Master by writing his novel. The crucial difference between them is that Levi Matvei stood up for his beliefs and continued writing, while the Master's psyche was broken by fear and humiliation, and he denounces his novel. Thus Levi Matvei deserved light, but the Master deserved only peace. Kanchukov's proposal creates an interpretation of the novel rather different from Sokolov's. By positing only two worlds and focusing on Levi and the Master instead of Pontius and Woland, he comes to a different interpretation of what was important to Bulgakov himself.

Many other critics have found the mapping Yeshua - the Master troubling as well. Laura Weeks [1996b] notes similarities between the two characters, but points out that the analogy breaks down at an obvious point: Yeshua never renounces his vision of truth and gives his life for it, whereas the Master burns his novel and seeks refuge at an asylum. Once again, it seems that only partial structure has been mapped, and the lack of other mappings is disturbing to the critics.

The figure of the Master has been by far the most frustrating for analysis. It does not conform to any single classification, and many different ones have been proposed. For example, David M. Bethea [1996] investigates the apocalyptic imagery in the novel and identifies the Master with Yeshua. Most importantly, he claims that Pilate is Woland's deputy whose purpose is to bring judgment and death to Yerushalaim, just as Woland's purpose is to bring death and justice to the Moscow world.

Alternatively, Ellendea Proffer [1996] points out similarities between the Master and Pontius Pilate: both men are tortured by the moon, both mutter the strange phrase "O gods, gods," and both have committed a crime that prevents them from seeing Light after their death. Pilate is guilty of cowardice, "the worst of all sins" [Ch. 26]; the Master is guilty of fear – a far lesser crime, even in Bulgakov's worldview. Knowing that it is Pilate and not Yeshua who is the main character of the Master's novel, such parallels are quite likely.

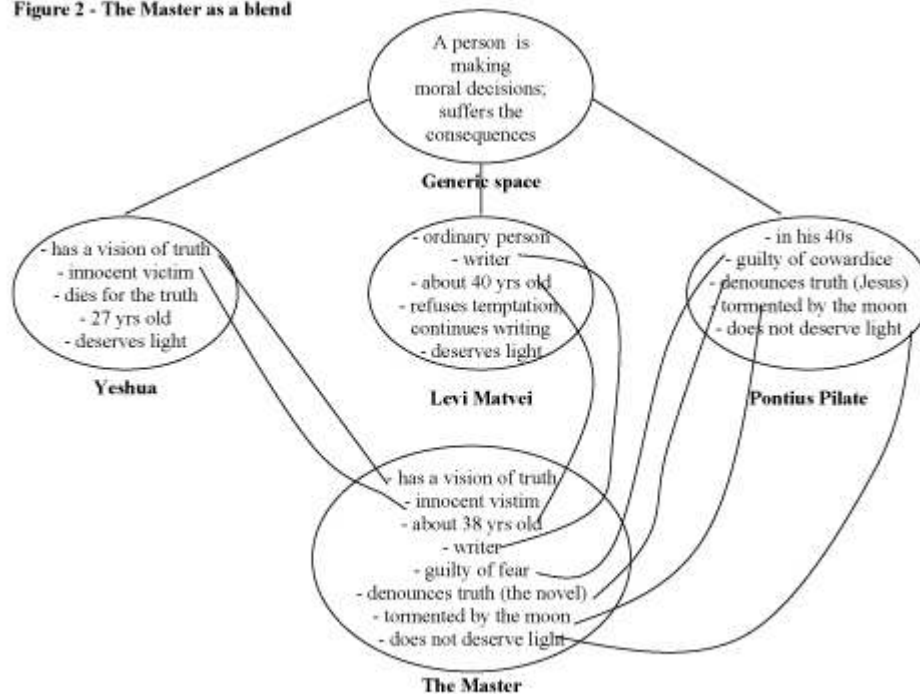
Undoubtedly, all of the parallels between the Master and the other characters with which he has been identified exist in the novel. However, creating straightforward mappings between a pair of characters and ignoring other possible mappings does not do justice to the novel's structural and artistic complexity. None of these mappings is complete – some have more structural parallels, others have more surface similarities. The fact that these mappings are partial is crucial to the meaning and the artistic value of the novel. The incompleteness is tantalizing and thought-provoking. For example, the partial mapping between Levi Matvei and the Master suggests that something is missing in the Soviet society, something that would allow artistic realization. The fact that the Master is guilty of fear, unlike Pilate, hints at the overwhelming fear of Stalin and his secret police that has encompassed the entire society, and from which there is no escape, not even for the Master's genius. In order for the novel to be fully appreciated, all of the potential mappings, as made explicit through the mental space analysis, need to be considered. Together, they create a brilliant commentary on the life in Soviet Russia in the 1930s, as well as a statement about Bulgakov's own philosophy. Without getting too deeply into analyzing each of these mappings, I would like to point out the importance of considering them all at once. The ambiguity of these mappings is what makes the Master such a multi-dimensional and intriguing character.

In mental spaces terminology, the Master's character can be viewed as a blend of other characters, which has some of the other characters' features but also a structure of its own. For instance, the Master and Yeshua are both innocent victims who had a vision of truth. However, Yeshua stands up for his beliefs and dies, while the Master gives up. Both Levi Matvei and the Master are small people whose greatest achievement is writing,



but while Levi refuses all temptations and continues to write, the Master denounces his novel. Figure 2 is a mental spaces diagram of the blend.

Figure 2 - The Master as a blend

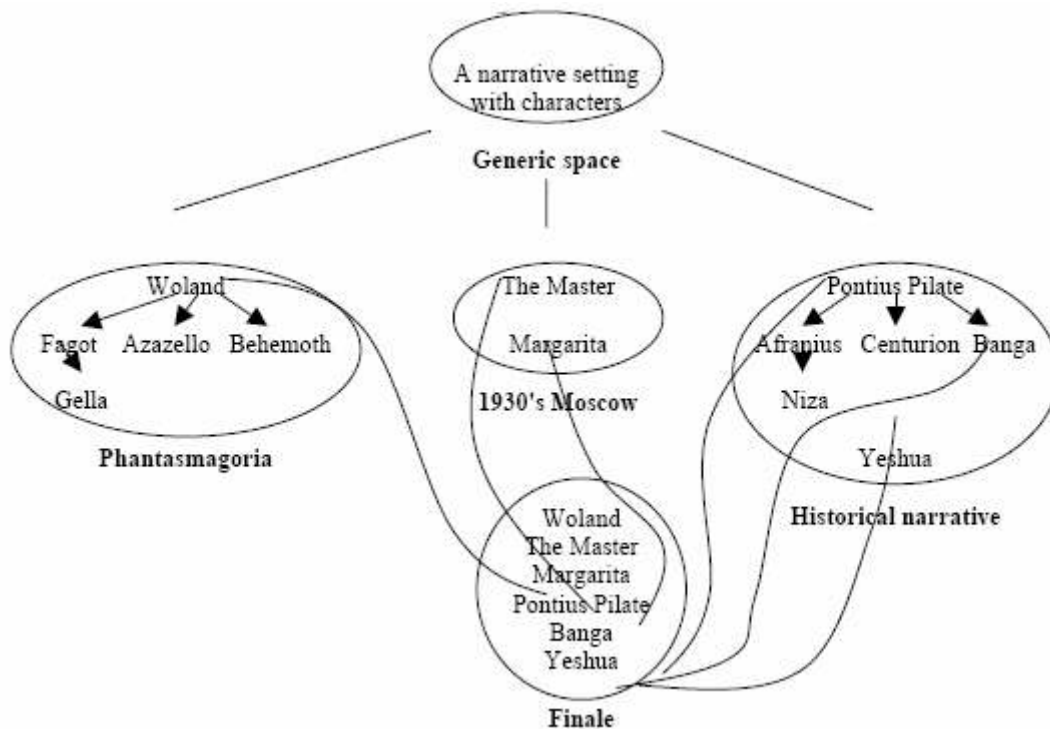


This is a very complex blend, and the significance of the particular mappings can be discussed at length. It indicates that the Master is an extremely complex character and a product of his times rather than a mere copy of the historical characters. If the Master wrote the novel about Pilate, he separated his own complex emotions into more basic, schematic features and spread them between his fictional characters.

### *The three worlds coming together*

Regardless of specific mappings between the three worlds of the novel, all critics agree that they come together at the end. The scene at the end of the novel includes characters from all three worlds (if we consider the Master and Margarita to be parts of the Moscow world as well as the phantasmagoria): Pilate, Banga and Yeshua from the historical narrative, the Master and Margarita from the Moscow world, and Woland and his retinue from the phantasmagoria. By now Woland and his friends have regained their true appearances. The Master is allowed to finish his novel by freeing Pilate, and Pilate's dream comes true: he walks along the moonlight path, arguing with the philosopher Yeshua. The characters are the same as in the previous worlds; however, the structure of this final world is quite different. In mental spaces theory this can be represented as a blend with emergent structure. Figure 3 is a diagram of that blend.

**Figure 1 - The three worlds coming together**



The blended space is different from the source spaces mainly because the characters now have their "true" identities: Woland is no longer playing tricks, and he is not surrounded by his servants. Similarly, Pilate's only true friend is near him – the dog Banga. If this final blend is any indication, then Sokolov's parallel between the cat Behemoth and Banga is a stretch – Woland did not leave Behemoth by his side, showing that the relationship between Woland and Behemoth is very different from that between Pilate and Banga. Behemoth's is not Woland's pet.

One of the essential properties that allow mental spaces to be blended is the generic structure, common to all of the created blends. This generic space may be common because of common plot elements, common appearances, or common time. Thus, time can be seen as another structure which maps the different worlds onto each other. Thus, the various attempts to map the timing of the different narratives and real-life prototypes (e.g. Beatie and Powell 1976) fit nicely into a mental-spaces explanation, as well.

### *The Master and Margarita and Goethe's Faust*

In addition to mappings between the worlds in the novel itself, critics have noticed connections between *The Master and Margarita* and Goethe's *Faust*. The most obvious such connection is in the epigraph that is a quote from the poem: "I am part of that force which wills forever evil and works forever good." Multiple other clues connect the two works of literature. However, here too the structure of *The Master and Margarita* does not entirely correspond to that of *Faust*. Some of Bulgakov's characters represent blends of more than one Faustian character, or lack significant features of the corresponding Faust characters. The tendency in literary criticism has been to pursue a particular

mapping, which has been quite fruitful in uncovering their implications. Mental Spaces theory can be used as a tool for bringing together and comparing these specific mappings.

Elizabeth Stenbock-Fermor [1968] provides one of the most detailed analyses of this connection. She identifies Woland with Mephistopheles and cites some very clear indications of the mapping: Mephistopheles introduces himself as Junker Voland at the beginning of the Walpurgis Night. Both characters are accompanied by black poodles: Mephistopheles first appears as a poodle, and Woland has a cane and a brooch with the images of a poodle. Later on, the poodle transforms itself into a hippopotamus (Behemoth in Russian). The connection between Mephistopheles and Woland is clear; however, it is much harder to find a single equivalent to Faust himself. The obvious choice – the Master – is different from Faust in important respects. Unlike Faust, he is no longer a striving artist by the time he meets Woland. He is "a broken being" who wants only peace. In a way, the Master corresponds to an earlier version of Faust, but does not follow Faust's fate. The Master does not make a pact with the devil in order to achieve fame and artistic success, and he does not become the devil's servant.

Stenbock-Fermor compares the later Faust to Fagot-Koroviev: he is "a knight who once told an unfortunate pun about light and darkness." [Ch. 32] As punishment for that pun (which is mentioned in Faust), the knight has become a servant of Satan and has to perform tricks for him. Indeed, the tricks Fagot performs at the show in the Variety Theatre are quite similar to the performance that Faust and Mephistopheles put on at the royal court.

On the other hand, in Bulgakov's novel it is Margarita who makes a pact with the devil in order to save her beloved Master. In other words, various characteristics of Faust have all found their way into The Master and Margarita, but they have been dispersed among different characters. Thus a straightforward mapping of the characters is not possible, and any such identification would be incomplete.

Figure 4 is a mental spaces diagram of the "dispersion" of Faust's characteristics among several of Bulgakov's characters:

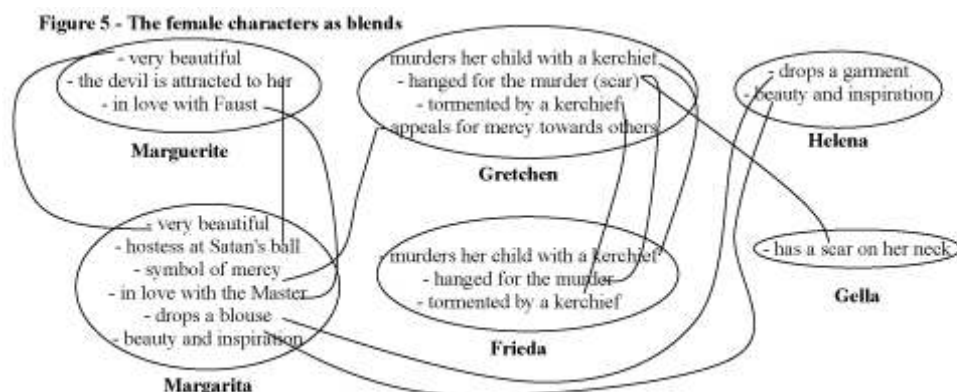
**Figure 2 - The Equivalentents of Faust**



Each of Bulgakov's characters blends with Faust by referencing some of his characteristics. The Master and Margarita presents an unpacking of the complex of features that is Faust.

The connection between Mephistopheles and Woland is also not complete. While there are no other characters that perform a similar role, Woland's function is quite different from that of Mephistopheles. Unlike Mephistopheles, Woland seems to be well aware of the end goal of his visit (the liberation of the Master). The evil that Woland is responsible for is rather harmless and does not result in the death of innocents (like Gretchen in Faust). The inferences that one may want to make from this connection (i.e. the role of the devil in the novel, the fate of the Master, etc.) are thwarted by the differences between the two characters. As Stenbock-Fermor notes, The Master and Margarita is a creative reworking of the Faust legend rather than a structural copy. The genius of the novel is the reinterpretation and recombination of the motifs from Faust in a very different yet recognizable way.

Margarita's character also seems to be a blend of several of Goethe's female characters. Like Marguerite (same name), she is beautiful and attractive to the devil. Like Gretchen, she is the symbol of pure love and feminine compassion. The blouse Margarita drops on her neighbor when she leaves her house corresponds to Helena's garment, which for Faust is the talisman he can use to escape the demons. On the other hand, the episodic character of Frieda at Satan's ball is also a version of Gretchen: Frieda killed her child with a handkerchief and was hanged for it. Gella, the witch in Woland's retinue, also has a scar on her neck, reminding us again of Gretchen. Figure 5 is a mental spaces diagram of Margarita's character as a blend of several of Goethe's characters, based on observations by Stenbock-Fermor, Olonova [1991] and Barratt [1996b].<sup>4</sup>



Other parallels include: Azazello and the monster into which Mephistopheles turns; Stravinsky and Chiron, the soothing doctor.

The complexity of these mappings is puzzling for the critics. However, if considered as a whole, the mappings present a creative tribute to Goethe's poem and play nicely into the rest of the novel. Bulgakov combines elements of Faust and other well-known sources to make an original statement.

#### *Prototypes for the novel's characters*

The Master and Margarita is often read as a roman-à-clef [Weeks 1996b], where the characters have real-life prototypes. The search for such prototypes requires detailed

<sup>4</sup> I chose to represent Marguerite and Gretchen as separate characters to make the parallels easier to analyze

knowledge of the time period in which the novel was written, and the results vary from critic to critic. The characters most commonly analyzed are the Master, the poet Ivan Bezdomny, the literary critics and other members of the writers' association. In this case also, Bulgakov's creative genius took elements of real people and combined them into several characters. One-to-one mappings, while insightful, do not capture the full complexity of the novel, as in the previous cases.

The most common association is between the Master and Bulgakov himself. It was difficult for Bulgakov to get his works published, and he frequently received bad reviews. However, others have suggested that the Master has prototypes among the Russian writers and poets whose fate was more tragic than Bulgakov's. Makarova and Abrashkin [1997] suggest the writer Leonid Andreev as the original Master. They cite certain biographical similarities, similar age and appearance. Andreev was interested in the Biblical themes and was bashed in the press for writing on such "anti-communist" subjects. They also suggest Sergei Esenin, the troubled Russian poet, as the prototype. Perhaps in this case as well, the Master's character is a blend of Bulgakov himself, Andreev, Esenin, and of course many other writers who were suppressed by the Soviet regime.

Similarly, critics have pointed out more than one prototype for the Master's enemies – critics Latunsky, Ariman and Lavrovich. Podgaets [1991] suggests that Latunsky, at least in name, is a blend of three leading literary critics of Bulgakov's time who disliked his work: A. Lunacharsky, the Minister of Culture, O. Litovsky, the head of the Theatre commission, and the critic A. Orlinsky. The fictional critic inherited some characteristics from all of them, and symbolized the whole literary machine rather than individuals. That is why, according to Podgaets, Margarita destroyed only Latunsky's apartment and not the critic himself: she was taking revenge against the system rather than the person.

The critic Mstislav Lavrovich is, according to Podgaets, a version of Maxim Gorky, a celebrated Soviet writer who was not quite part of the literary hierarchy. The prototype of the critic Ariman is the secretary of the writers' association Averbach. Moreover, Ariman is the name of the ancient Persian spirit of death and destruction.

Ivan Bezdomny, the poet, has also been the subject of much discussion. Makarova and Abrashkin suggest a blend between two young writers, Ivan Pribludny and Ivan Startsev. Weeks [1996b] compares Bezdomny to the poet Bezymensky, and Riukhin – to Maiakovsky. Some other interpretations have suggested that Bezymensky is the prototype for Riukin instead, and Bezdomny is the fictional version of Esenin. In other words, many different permutations have been suggested, but very few of them admit the possibility of multiple prototypes.

Overall, the participants of the literary circle in the novel may have inherited some characteristics of their prototypes and can be seen as blends with emergent structure: the fictional characters are different from the prototypes.

### *The novel as allegory*

Analyzing the novel as belonging to a certain genre imposes expectations on the characters and the structure of the novel; it is a way of fitting the text to a certain frame. One such example is viewing *The Master and Margarita* as an allegory of Soviet Russia and Russian intellectual history in the 20th century. Weeks [1996b] cites Elena Mahlow as the author of one such interpretation. For Mahlow, Margarita represents the prerevolutionary intelligentsia, Pilate represents the dictatorship of the proletariat,

Yeshua is the true proletariat, etc. Other interpretations have suggested that Woland stands for Stalin, and his entourage represents Stalin's famous henchmen – Voroshilov, Molotov, and Kaganovich. The murder of Yuda of Kerioth is equivalent to the murder of Kirov, etc. The association of Woland with Stalin is fairly common. Stalin officially liked Bulgakov's plays, and the triangle Woland-Master-Margarita can be seen as the complex relationship between Stalin, Bulgakov and Elena Sergeevna, the writer's third wife.

All such attempts to impose outside structure on parts of the novel place expectations on the plot and the characters, based on the source frame. Sometimes these work out, sometimes not quite, but the match is never perfect. In other words, the novel is far too complex to be fitted into a single interpretation. This does not mean that one should not try to analyze the potential interpretations of the novel; rather, in addition to a detailed examination of the specific mappings, we need a way to represent the “big picture” - and Mental Spaces provides the tools for such a representation.

### *Theological interpretations*

One of the richest grounds for interpretation is the theological and metaphysical foundation of the novel. Various frames have been suggested: from the traditional Slavic Orthodox views of Christ and Satan, to gnostic views in which the Good and the Evil are on equal footing. The different frames have led critics to interpret the role of Woland in drastically different lights: from benevolently executing the will of God on par with Jesus, to being an all-powerful force of evil who tricks the master into giving up his novel and kills him and Margarita. The difference in interpretation clearly shows how one's assumed frame (religious framework) structures one's perception of the novel.

### *Unified readings*

Instead of splitting the novel into several parallel worlds, some critics have suggested a unified reading, claiming that there is only one novel coming from a single source, a single authority. There are several versions of the source: Laura Weeks [1996b] claims that the narrator is Ivan Bezdomny, and he narrates portions of the Pilate novel as they were told to him by Woland, the Master, and his own dreams. Others have suggested Ivan as the source as well, but claimed that everything that happened was his hallucination, a result of his illness. In that case, Ivan may or may not have created the parallels between the historical characters and the magical ones. Since he had not heard the opera Faust, he could not have invented the Faustian imagery accompanying Woland. In any case, there would need to be an outside perceiver (perhaps the reader) to notice the connections to Faust.

Yet another option is that the novel burned by the Master was, in fact, The Master and Margarita. In this case, some of the parallels between Pilate's world and the Master's world may be more deliberate.

Boris Gasparov (1994) presents another unified reading of the novel as a myth. He sees some of the same leitmotifs running through all three of the novel's narratives, such as the lack of foreign words, theatrical settings, musical elements, etc. In particular, he describes the fire set by Woland in Moscow as reflecting both the fire of Rome under Nero and the Moscow fire of 1812:

Таким образом, пожар - это и прошлое и будущее, перенесенное в настоящее, мифологическое воспоминание, являющееся способом видения действительности и одновременно же - пророчеством, исполнение которого в свою очередь наступает

лишь постольку, поскольку предыдущий мифологический срез определяет видение последующих событий.<sup>5</sup>

He notices mappings and blends between the three worlds and external historical events, and beautifully expresses their relationship. However, explicit terminology provided by the Mental Spaces theory may aid in such descriptions, and also show how a reader may understand the mappings. In other words, Mental Spaces theory connects a reader's interpretation of the work to everyday cognitive processes. In this example, the fire in the novel is a blend of the two other fires, where some of the structure associated with both events is incorporated into the blend.

### **Sources of confusion**

One can read *The Master and Margarita* from many different perspectives and compare it to many different outside sources (literary or historical). Each perspective produces complicated parallels and mappings within the novel itself and with the outside sources. Insisting on a single interpretation or a single mapping would unnecessarily simplify the novel and take away a lot of its artistic merit. It is natural, and useful, to draw the parallels between different parts of the novel and other sources. However, it is also useful to compare the different mappings and to look at the complexity in a coherent manner. No one interpretation of the novel can be correct or complete. The theory of mental spaces, while not supplying a complete interpretation either, provides the tools for making the mappings explicit and seeing where they are incomplete.

### **The use of space**

Our everyday experience conditions the way in which we view the world. According to the Contemporary Theory of Metaphor [Lakoff 1983, Lakoff and Johnson 1980], people associate certain basic experiences with more abstract concepts and use them in speech and other behaviors, often subconsciously. We expect those connections to be retained in things we encounter, including literature, and when the connections are broken or reversed, we get the feeling that something is wrong. We may not be able to explain it rationally, but we notice unusual cases like that. Bulgakov's use of space provides an example of indicating that something is wrong by inverting the expected connections, but we also find examples of the traditional space metaphors that strengthen the symbolism of the novel.

In particular, Bulgakov implicitly uses the metaphor POWER IS UP. From our childhood experience, we know that taller people tend to be stronger and more powerful than shorter people (children), and a lot of our language use reflects that connection. In the Judean chapters of *The Master and Margarita*, height is the symbol of power, as well. Pontius Pilate is the source of civil authority in Yerushalaim, and he resides in a palace high above the city. He descends closer to the crowd to announce the criminals' sentences, thus compromising some of his power. He is never comfortable at the lower level and prefers to stay on top of his hill. In another part of the city, the Jewish temple stands on a different hill, and the High Priest Caiaphas who lives there embodies the

<sup>5</sup> Thus, the fire is both past and future, transferred into the present; a mythological recollection which acts as a way of seeing reality and at the same time it is a prophesy, the fulfillment of which, in turn, happens only insofar as the previous mythological slice determines the view of the later events. <My translation>

religious power. On the night of Passover, the candles are lit on top of the temple, authorizing and signifying the start of the holiday. In fact, those candles want to overpower nature – they rise almost as high as the light of the moon, as if they want to be more powerful:

When Judas turned [...], he saw two gigantic five-branched candelabra had been lit above the temple at a dizzying, fearsome height. [...] it seemed to him that ten immense lamps had been hung up over the city and were competing with the light of the single lamp rising higher and higher over Jerusalem – the moon. [Ch. 26]

Just as the holiday candles compete with the moon, so does Caiaphas compete with Pilate in authority over Jerusalem. Yet, neither of them has absolute power – the hills of Jerusalem are still lower than the sky and the moon. Pilate also has an invisible superior whom he sees as being above him: the Roman emperor Tiberias. The fear of Tiberias is the reason Pilate commits the crime of cowardice and sends Yeshua to his death. This is perhaps the most evident allusion to Stalin and his invisible power that the novel presents.

Yeshua is executed on a different hill – the Bald Mountain (Golgotha). He was sent to die by a combination of civil and religious authorities, Pilate and Caiaphas. Yet in his death he defies both of them. His hill is in a way higher than the other two – he gains immortality and the moral authority over the city (and all of humanity, one can claim), while Pilate will be forever tortured by guilt, and Caiaphas's temple will be destroyed by Roman soldiers. Yeshua's death on Golgotha signifies the victory of the idea (something higher, abstract) over the earthly matters. After all, the Yershalaim hills are still below Heaven, so the power they represent cannot be absolute.

The phantasmagoria scenes present a similar use of the POWER IS UP metaphor. At the end of his visit, Woland sits on a rooftop overlooking the city (which, by the way, is described in a way very similar to Jerusalem). He has a lot more power than the ordinary citizens, although it may not be absolute.

The above examples are conventional uses of the space metaphors, and present no problems for the reader. There are also some instances of a related metaphor GOOD IS UP, or WELL-BEING IS UP. However, Bulgakov reverses the metaphor in describing the Master's life, and the contradiction is startling. The Stalinist reality suppresses the Master's artistic expression, and in the Soviet society the natural human associations are perverted and broken. To the Master (when he is alive), the upward direction is frightening and fatal.<sup>6</sup> As Laura Weeks [1996c] notes, his dream apartment is in a basement, where he can only see the feet of the passers-by. The entrance to the apartment is three steps down from the street level. Margarita, who lives on the top floor of a mansion, has to descend into his world, and only in that basement are they happy. When the Master goes out into the world with the completed novel, he ascends the three steps, and suffers greatly: "And I went into the world, with the novel in my hands, and then my life ended." [Ch. 13]. Margarita's descent from the staircase in Satan's apartment results (indirectly) in the Master's liberation. All of these associations seem to

<sup>6</sup> Although in everyday experience, being up may correspond to well-being, in the system of Christian values humility (being low) is morally preferable. The Master can be seen as exercising humility, while most of the rest of the characters are not. However, being forced to stay down (as in the Moscow world) cannot be a good thing, either.



suggest the metaphor BAD IS UP, that the power of the state is upwards and it will destroy the free-thinking artist. The implication is that everything is upside down in the totalitarian society.

When the Master dies, the height associations are restored back to normal. He ascends to the afterlife with Margarita and Woland, and he finds peace somewhere high above the earth. Even death is better than life in Stalinist Russia. The flipping of the spatial orientation corresponds to another reversal in the Moscow world. Woland and his retinue, the powers of evil, fulfill the role of good in this world – they liberate the artist from the grips of the Soviet regime. This is a creative reworking of the epigraph from Goethe. But if in Faust, Mephistopheles is unwittingly fulfilling the will of God, Bulgakov seems to suggest that in the Soviet regime the devil's actions are still better than the baseness of the Stalinist world. The system is so unnatural and evil that even the devil is disgusted by it.

Here it is important to point out the influence on Bulgakov of the works of a Russian theologian turned mathematician, Pavel Florensky, who wrote in the 1920s and 30s (examined in [Weeks 1996b]). Florensky considered three to be a magic number (hence the three worlds). He also had a theory of parallel worlds that were mirror images of each other. Based on the analysis of Dante's *Divina Comedia*, the theory states that to get from one world to the other, one simply has to flip upside down. Margarita flies upside down for a short time when she exits the city on her way to the Satan's ball, thus entering a different reality. If this theory did in fact influence Bulgakov's portrayal of the different worlds, then we can see the Moscow world as an inverted image of the phantasmagoria and of the historical narrative. A cognitive analysis of the spatial metaphors involved strengthens that hypothesis, and also explains why there is a sense of parallelism and mismatch at the same time when we compare the different worlds.

Bulgakov also uses flying as a symbol of breaking away from the powers of the world. In the Moscow scenes, only Woland and his entourage can fly. They are not part of the strict hierarchy to which all the citizens belong, they are not bound by the official ranks and the police have no power over them. This image also has to do with the metaphor POWER IS UP. Citizens at the higher levels of society have power over those at the lower levels. Neither the higher nor the lower-ranked officials can move up or down the hierarchy freely: they are placed there by the highest authority. However, flying gives one a way to break out of the hierarchy and into a different world. Margarita does exactly that with the help of the magic cream. She flies away, and at the same time becomes invisible – another symbol of escape from the Soviet society! She yells while flying out of her house: "Invisible and free! Invisible and free!" [Ch. 21].

An examination of the height symbolism in the novel shows that conventional, embodied metaphors play a very important role in Bulgakov's vision of his worlds. He uses the traditional metaphors to emphasize the position of power of some of his characters. Interestingly, he also uses inverted metaphors to indicate that something is not right in the Stalinist state, or in the Master's psyche. The inversion creates a startling impression in the reader and adds to the novel's emotional impact, even though the reader may not consciously realize why.

## **Conclusion**

Literary criticism can benefit from the ideas of metaphor theory and mental spaces in examining complex works of literature such as *The Master and Margarita*. These theoretical constructs provide a way to explicitly state the connections between the various parts of the novel and other sources that the novel alludes to. In this particular

case, the mental spaces mappings show the complexity and the incompleteness of the parallels between the novel's worlds, between the novel and Goethe's Faust, etc. In addition, analysis in terms of the embodied metaphors can explain certain intuitive reactions among the readers. Pointing out the natural psychological associations between, for example, height and power, can add to the symbolism of the novel, and suggest new interpretations.

The analysis of the specific mappings is necessary in order to explore the meanings suggested by the matches. However, in order to appreciate the complexity and the ingenuity of a literary work, one also needs to be able to compare the various mappings. The theory of mental spaces provides the exact tools for talking about the matches and the mismatches, for representing them in a systematic and objective manner; it presents the mapping creation in terms of basic cognitive mechanisms that help explain the readers' reactions. It should be used in conjunction with traditional literary criticism in order to expose the full complexity of a literary work.

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