

Contemplation in Absurdity: On the Narrative Characteristics of *The Master and Margarita*

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Abstract:

In *The Master and Margarita*, a classic Russian magical realist novel, three major narrative lines spanning time and space constitute the most prominent structural features of its narrative framework [1]. However, beyond the connection and embedding of these three lines, the primary narrative level, as the core linking chapter contents, possesses immense literary structural value and significance in its internal structure. The other two lines are connected and interwoven on this basis [2]. The author delicately endows each chapter with the novel's writing intent and core, taking chapters of the primary narrative level as units of narrative clues, embedding philosophy and thought in seemingly absurd plots, and enriching the depth of the work. In addition to the explicit lines, the author develops an independent implicit line around the theme of "divinity", through which he conveys his reflections on God and truth, which is also worthy of in-depth exploration. By stringing together relevant objects and contents, Bulgakov's contemplation can be studied from another perspective.

Keywords: *The Master and Margarita*; narrative characteristics; narrative structure

1. The Primary Narrative Level

The novel is composed of an embedded structure as a whole. Undoubtedly, the activities of Woland and his entourage in Moscow account for the largest proportion, forming the primary narrative level that connects all plots [3]. The other two levels—the guilt and atonement of Pontius Pilate for Yeshua, and the love between the Master and Margarita—are nested under the primary narrative level. This allows the

theme of the entire novel to span time, space and culture, expressing Bulgakov's insight and reflection on the grand phenomena of human society. [4]

1.1 Repetitive Imagery

The most obvious feature in the embedded structure of the primary narrative level is repetitive imagery, with moonlight being the most typical.

In Chapter 3, When Berlioz tried to escape from Koryov's constant entanglement, he slipped on oil on

the platform and saw the "golden-dyed" full moon, unable to judge its position. Then, at the moment of his death, the moon "shattered into pieces" in his eyes, and fell into darkness immediately.

Subsequently, in Chapter 4, the author re-emphasizes the hazy golden moonlight. In Chapter 32, when Margarita, the Master, Woland's entourage meet Pilate in eternity, Pilate sits on a flat ground "brightly and transparently green illuminated by moonlight", completely ignoring the heavy sound of horse hooves. The narrative lines of *The Master and Margarita* are diverse, complex, explicit and implicit. It is slightly simplistic to classify them only by narrative levels; analyzing the embedded structure with chapters as units can fully demonstrate the ingenious design of the novel, and the meaning of implicit lines can be interpreted through details.

Moonlight in the primary narrative level is dislocated and collapsed, and the prominent "golden" color creates an absurd contrast for readers, symbolizing the collapse of secular rational values. The "haziness" in Chapter 4 carries a sense of loss and confusion. The observations of the moon by the dead Berlioz and Ivan, who witnessed his death, reflect the uncertainty and fragility of the truths and beliefs they advocated in the secular world. In Chapter 32, when all characters gather under Woland's leadership, the moonlight becomes transparent, symbolizing ultimate reality.

Through the repetition of different states of the moon imagery, Bulgakov implicitly he points out the process of revealing truth in the novel, forming an uneven closed loop—The "haziness" in Chapter 4 carries a sense of loss and confusion. The observations of the moon by the dead Berlioz and Ivan, who witnessed his death, reflect the uncertainty and fragility of the truths and beliefs they advocated in the secular world. In Chapter 32, when all characters gather under Woland's leadership, the moonlight becomes transparent, symbolizing ultimate reality.

1.2 Repetitive Spatial Displacement

In addition, repetitive spatial displacement in the primary narrative level seems absurd but actually contains profound meaning.

This a-geographical mutation disintegrates the legitimacy of the physical world, indicating that the primary narrative time and space are no longer a reality governed by rationality, but an "irrational theater" under Woland's judgment. Everything is controlled and judged by this divine figure.

Ivan and the host Manglas are indirectly and directly sent to the same psychiatric hospital by Woland successively. Two people with completely different identities are

confined to this closed and disconnected irrational space. However, Ivan awakens and is reborn gradually after encountering the Master, while Manglas indulges in the fear and pain of losing his head. This incident shows that under absolute truth, all gains in secular society are like phantoms that offer no help; in the end, one can only rely on personal spiritual realm and inside information.

Stepa is transported to Yalta, and Varenukha is beaten violently and then carried to Stepa's house, both with instantaneous changes and compulsory.

Woland effortlessly manipulates the destinations of these secular people through various means and magic, highlighting how fragile the beliefs and concepts that people usually recognize and trust are—such as staying in Moscow with a stable identity and income to live in peace. Psychiatric hospitals and other cities, these increasingly distant geographical locations constantly shake the stability of the real order, exposing its essential nothingness, which is completely insignificant in the face of divine power.

Meanwhile, these spatial transfers carry a strong punitive nature. The four characters are inherently cowardly: the hypocrisy of relying on the system, the flattery of bullying the weak and fearing the strong, the ridiculousness of grandstanding, and the stubbornness of blindly following ideology and daring not to face the truth.

The compulsory changes of their spaces reveal that cowards cannot control their own positions and can only be arbitrarily dominated by fate and power. power."cowardice": cowardice is far more than a moral defect; it is the root cause of losing one's existential coordinates, self-position, and subjectivity, exposing the horror of this word.

1.3 Reversals

The author further disintegrates reality through multiple repetitive reversal techniques.

The first is the reversal of identity. Nikanor, the apartment manager, thought he had completed a profitable transaction with Korovyov, but was reported by the latter and arrested as a fugitive. Similarly, in Chapter 17, Vasily, the theater accountant, is arrested on the spot when foreign currencies of different countries are found stacked in his bag by the police. Even more absurdly, a group of bureaucrats sing *Holy Baikal*—a song praising freedom and resistance—under Korovyov's command. The original profiteurs become victims, disciplinarians become violators, and system appendages become rebels against the system. [5] All these absurd transformations complete the author's structural deconstruction of the modern social identity system, revealing that the wealth and status of people with empty spirits and ignorant thoughts are utter nothingness.

The second is the reversal of truth and falsehood. As early as Chapters 1 to 3, Woland told Berlioz and Ivan about his identity, Berlioz's fate, and the story of Pilate and Yeshua, all of which were proven true in subsequent chapters. However, they were treated with suspicion and contempt at that time; Woland was regarded by them as a suspicious foreigner, a lunatic, a liar, and a spy. Here, the author lays a fundamental foundation for the truth and falsehood of the entire novel: truth is regarded as dangerous and crazy in the world, while lies grant safety and rationality, forming a sharp satire. In Chapter 12, this reversal of truth and falsehood appears in Woland's magic show: fake money is treated as real money, and people frantically snatch fake clothes and furs as luxury goods, but all these disappear like illusions after leaving the theater. This further presents two attitudes of people towards truth and falsehood in the novel: falsity has become the choice pursued and supported by desire and instinct, while truth is rejected instead. Bulgakov continuously throws his reflections and doubts on the real world to readers here.

In summary, the author uses a variety of structural repetitions in the primary narrative level, achieving contemplation on reality, human nature, truth and falsehood under absurd plots within a single narrative layer. [6]

2. The Implicit Narrative Level

Bulgakov hides a narrative line connected only by objects and a few plots. It is subtly converged into a complete implicit narrative in chapters in a highly fragmented form theme of "divinity".

2.1 Religious Objects

In Chapter 4, *The Chase*, Ivan breaks into a lovers' apartment by accident while chasing Woland's entourage, where he sees a forgotten icon, paper icons, two wedding candles, and he takes one candle away.

This scene seems accidental, irrelevant and even funny in the main line, but constitutes the starting point of the implicit narrative. The apartment itself is a closed space of secular desire, vulgar romance and chaotic daily life. Icons and candles are not enshrined or cherished, but randomly placed and forgotten in the corner. They are not the center of faith, but abandoned old objects. This arrangement itself forms a strong metaphor: divinity has not disappeared, but has been squeezed to the edge, corners and dark places of modern life, becoming useless, outdated and forgotten remnants. Here, the author reveals the real situation of divinity in reality.

In Chapter 5, Ivan shouts like a madman for everyone to call the police to arrest Woland, and the candle goes out in this tense and chaotic moment. In Chapter 6, facing the

doctor's inquiry, Ivan repeatedly mentions icons and candles in his explanation of chasing Woland—for example, he pinned the icon on his chest before running out, and taking the candle was also a measure, but the candle was already broken at the time of the conversation.

2.2 Extinguishing and Breaking of the Candle

The extinguishing and subsequent breaking of the candle symbolize that the light of divinity has completely dimmed, gone out and broken in modern Moscow. As a subtle religious object and an obscure narrative device in Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, the candle is not a trivial prop but a hidden carrier of the novel's core themes, quietly undertaking the task of implying the spiritual crisis of the era and the loss of human faith. This seemingly trivial detail, interspersed in the complicated narrative, is a delicate foreshadowing by the author for the disillusionment of the world: when the society of 1930s Moscow falls into the quagmire of lies, cowardice, greed and absurdity, people's faith loses its foundation, the sacred is gradually swallowed by the secular trivialities and utilitarian desires, and the truth, which should be cherished, is buried in indifference and neglect, never to be recovered again.

People in the novel constantly touch this "candle"—the symbol of divinity and truth—whether it is the Master's persistent pursuit of spiritual salvation through writing, Margarita's unswerving loyalty to love and beauty, or even the faint sense of guilt in Pilate's heart. However, they always neglect its value and bury its light in the chaos of reality.

Bulgakov skillfully strings together a short but crucial implicit narrative line through the repeated picking up and shattering of the candle. This line, like an invisible thread, runs through the entire novel and becomes the spiritual background of the three explicit narrative lines, providing solid thematic support for them.

The line of Pilate and Jesus, the line of the Master's spiritual salvation, and the line of Woland's judgment on Moscow all root their spiritual origin in this implicit "loss of divinity" symbolized by the extinguishing of the candle. Pilate's cowardice in the face of power led to the death of Jesus, which is the extinction of the light of divinity in the historical dimension; the Master's manuscript was burned and his spirit collapsed, which is the dimming of the light of truth in the artistic and spiritual field; the absurdity and greed of the literary elite and ordinary citizens in Moscow are the concrete manifestations of the secular swallowing the sacred, which directly leads to the "extinguishing" of the candle of divinity in the real world. This obscure narrative design of the candle not only enriches the artis-

tic connotation of the novel but also deepens the theme of spiritual loss and the search for salvation, making the expression of the novel more subtle and profound, and leaving endless thinking for readers about faith, truth and human nature.

3. Conclusion

Bulgakov uses many secret and delicate ingenious designs, allowing the seemingly straightforward and single primary narrative level to be independently analyzed structurally, and enabling the novel to be interpreted from more angles and levels. The whole novel is full of absurd humor and strong satire, expressing the author's reflections on Moscow in the 20th century anature, society and truth into the flexible and variable narrative levels, making *The Master and Margarita* an immortal work to this day.

4. References

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