

Mental Spaces in Plath's "Mad Girl Love Song": A Cognitive Reading

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Abstract: *There have been various approaches to deal with literature. Within the cognitive linguistic framework, Mental Spaces Theory provides a promising model that can yield illuminating analyses of literary texts in general and poetry in particular. In this respect, the current paper attempts a stylistic reading of Sylvia Plath's "Mad Girl Love Song" by applying Gilles Fauconnier's Mental Spaces Theory (1994-1997) as a model for analysis. The model proved a useful tool for literary analysis.*

1. Introduction

The cognitive linguistic enterprise emerged as a movement due to dissatisfaction with the dominating *Generative* paradigm in linguistics in the 1970s. This new linguistic school is described by Evans and Green (2006: 6) as:

a 'movement' or an 'enterprise' because it is not a specific theory. Instead, it is an approach that has adopted a common set of guiding principles, assumptions and perspectives which had led to a diverse range of complementary, overlapping (and sometimes competing) theories.

It is a trend of linguistic thought and practice which is “concerned with investigating the relationship between human language, the mind and socio- physical experience” (Evans et al, 2007: 2). Cognitive linguists contend that in every life interaction there lies a host of mental and conceptual processes that underlie such a relationship; “interaction is critically dependent on the embodied minds that engage in it, and cannot be properly understood or described without a detailed characterization of the conceptions they entertain” (Langacker, 1999: 14-15). Among the leading branches of the cognitive enterprise is cognitive semantics, of which Mental Spaces Theory is a prominent offspring. The subsequent sections aim to provide some details on both.

2. Cognitive Semantics

Traditional semantics (or truth-conditional semantics) envisages the meaning of a sentence as a truth-conditioned value, that is the meaning of a linguistic expression is out there in the world represented by a referent or a state of affairs that can be checked (as true or false). The assumption holds that words name things or objects, in the external world and that meaning resides in the phenomena outside linguistic expressions. This formal attitude to semantics marked the beginning of the previous century until the seventies when it became obvious that “there is a dissatisfaction with the semantics offered by existing formal linguistic theories and a growing interest in explicitly focusing on meaning as a cognitive phenomenon” (Allwood and Gardenfors, 1999: vii). According to cognitive semantics, there is no such direct connection between the word

and its referent in the external physical world. For example, Brandt (2005: 1578-1579) emphasizes the 'immediate' nature of the context as a prominent factor of cognitive semantics when stating that:

The notion of semantics in this context is functional and representational, in the sense that meaning should be approached as it functions in on-line process of thought and communication, and therefore in the mental representations that are active in on-line production of meaning addressing some situation of the cognizer.

On the same track, Portner (2009: 111) supports this same position of 'mental representations' when arguing that "one of the major emphases of cognitive semantics is the idea that meaning is to be explained in terms of general properties of cognition". Lee (2001, xi) further explains the nature of such properties when he states that "linguistic coding involves such factors as selectivity, perspective, focus, background, framing, modes of categorization, and so on". Seen in this light, then, cognitive semantics stands opposite to traditional semantics in the perspective from which it approaches meaning, i.e., the focus on the dynamicity of meaning. This characteristic of meaning construction is best manifested in Gilles Fauconnier's (1994-1997) model of mental spaces. In his model, Fauconnier underpins the role of *mapping* in meaning construction. Mappings are local connections between separate *mental spaces* that are activated on-line in the process of communication. The theory of mental spaces is briefly outlined below.

3. Fauconnier's Model of Mental Spaces

A prominent part of the relatively new trend in cognitive semantics is the **Mental Spaces Theory**. The theory unfolded in Fauconnier's (1994) *Mental Spaces: Aspects of Meaning Construction in Natural Language and in Fauconnier's (1997) Mapping in Thought and Language* and it was essentially developed to solve certain reference ambiguities, where in the light of traditional semantics we can find cases of contradiction that yields a sentence neither true nor false, as in the celebrated example: "In the picture, the girl with blue eyes has green eyes", and many other similar examples. Mental Spaces Theory provides a solution to such contradictions by positing a non-direct relation between the words and their referents; a relation mediated by mental spaces.

According to Fauconnier and Turner (2002: 102), mental spaces are "small conceptual packets constructed as we think and talk, for purposes of local understanding and action. They are very partial assemblies containing elements, structures by frames and cognitive models". They further argue that information processing is a kind of co-activation and from this perspective "mental spaces operate in working memory but are built up by activating structures available from long-term memory" (ibid). Thus, meaning is not directly assigned to a sentence, but is the product of various conceptual operations that the sentence undergoes; "language itself does not encode meaning. Instead, words (and other linguistic units) are treated as 'prompts' for the construction of meaning (Evans et al, 2007: 131). That is to say, meaning is a process rather than a discrete 'thing' that can be 'packed' by language". More precisely, mental spaces are cognitive constructions traced in the discourse to refer to hypothetical or imagined worlds, i.e., the linguistic

expressions used in a discourse do not necessarily refer to concrete entities in the actual world, but are themselves triggers that set up mental representations for those linguistic expressions (Coulson and Fauconnier, 1999: 2; Dancygier, 2002: 353). Radden and Dirven (2007: 30) emphasize this nature of mental spaces when they explain that they are actually “short-lived packages of knowledge evoked on-line in communication.” Coulson (1997: 22) reflects on the same notion when she states that “although motivated by linguistic data, mental spaces are not specifically linguistic in nature. Rather, they reflect the operation of more general cognitive processes.”

In Fauconnier (1994: 16), mental spaces are represented as incrementable sets with elements that are referred to as (a, b, c, ...) all with relations holding between them (R_{1ab} , R_{2a} , R_{3cbf} ,). This configuration allows new elements to be added and new structures to be established.

One crucial notion to Mental Spaces Theory is that of *frames*: cognitive models that represent the speaker's background knowledge (Fauconnier, 1997: 40-49). Framing is the “process of establishing correspondences between two or more mental spaces” (Lee, 2001: 203). The following example illustrates the idea:

In the 60s Yugoslavia was the Brazil of Europe.

Even if having not heard the sentence before, one interprets it to mean that in the 60s Yugoslavia was the most exciting of all the European football teams to watch. This interpretation is based on background information (frame) which represents one's knowledge that Yugoslavia and Brazil are names of countries and that Europe is the name of a continent and that Yugoslavia is in Europe whereas Brazil is not (ibid: 204). On the same track, Coulson and Oakley (2005) present the following example:

Lisa, who has been depressed for several months now, is smiling in the picture.

Presumably, the speaker intends to create a comparison between the representation of Lisa's emotional state in the picture and her current one in real life. Though she looks happy in the picture, Lisa is actually depressed now. To understand both states of Lisa's mood, Mental Spaces Theory argues that the above statement prompts the listener to construct two mental spaces, one for the real situation where Lisa is depressed and another for the photograph where she is happy depending on information about the real-life Lisa and the one derived from the content of the photograph.

The listener of the above example encodes the information it presents at the referential level by dividing it into conceptual categories relevant for the different aspects of the situation of discourse about Lisa and her picture. This partitioning process, however, entails the necessity to cope with the relationships that exist between counterpart elements as well as relations that hold between different elements in the mental spaces. The word ‘counterpart’ draws attention to the notion of *mapping*.

3.1. Connecting Mental Spaces

According to Fauconnier (1994; 1997; 2007) language provides many devices to trace the construction and connection of mental spaces. The following are the most common of them:

3.1.1. Space Builders

Fauconnier (2007: 371; 1994: 17) defines space builders as “expressions that may establish a new space” or refer back to one already introduced in the discourse. These may be propositional phrases (*in Len’s picture, in John’s mind, in 1929, at the factory, from her point of view*), adverbs (*really, probably, possibly, theoretically*), connectives (*if A then---, either, ---, or---*), underlying subject-verb combinations (*Max believes---*, *Mary hopes----*, *Gertrude claims*). Evans (2007: 202) contends that “what is special about space builders is that they require the hearer to ‘set up’ a scenario beyond the ‘here and now’, whether this scenario reflects past or future reality, reality in some other location, hypothetical situations, situations that reflect ideas and beliefs, and so on”.

3.1.2. Names and Descriptions (Grammatically Noun Phrases)

Names (Max, Napoleon, NABISCO, etc.), and descriptions (the mail man, a vicious snake, some boys who were tired, etc.) either set up a new element or point to existing elements in the discourse construction. They also associate such elements with properties (e.g., ‘having the name Napoleon’, ‘being a boy’, ‘being tired’, etc.) (Fauconnier, 2007: 371-2).

3.1.3. Tenses and Moods

Tenses and moods “do not by themselves explicitly set up spaces, but they give important grammatical clues concerning the spaces relevant for the sentence being processed” (Fauconnier, 1994: 33). For instance, a sentence starting with the space builder ‘1950’ followed by a past tense means that readers stay in the mental space of 1950, whereas the same year followed by a present tense indicates a shift back to reality. Fauconnier (2007: 365) emphasizes the fact that “a major function of tense in language is to establish local time ordering relations between neighboring mental spaces and to keep track of viewpoint and focus shifts.” In the same vein, Dancygier (2002: 355) maintains that “verb forms determine the type of connections among spaces which are linked temporally and/or hypothetically.” For example, ‘would’ in the sentence “He wouldn’t come to my party” can be interpreted in two ways; First, it can refer to a hypothetical situation in the future from the speaker’s present point of view, or second, it can be inferred as referring to a future predicted situation from a past point of view. This obviously shows how a verb may determine the meaning of a sentence as being ‘contrary to fact’, ‘impossible’, etc. in virtue of defining the temporal point of view (ibid). Furthermore, Abrantes (2010: 182), too, asserts that “tenses are the means in language by which the speaker relates to the surrounding context and the situation of speaking, but they may also be used to refer to a time other than the one they normally represent.” In doing so, tenses are not only space builders, but indicators of viewpoint and focus, too.

Grammatically speaking, mood is defined as an indication of “what the speaker wants to do with the proposition in a particular discourse context. In other words, mood is a

grammatical reflection of the speaker's purpose in speaking" (Kroeger, 2005: 163). According to mental spaces theory and from Fauconnier and Sweetser's (1996: 19) point of view, however, "The choice of mood could both mark the speaker's viewpoint and prevent direct access to the information in the relative clause from a base 'reality' mental space."

3.1.4. Pre-suppositional Constructions

These include some grammatical constructions, like definite descriptions, aspectuals, clefts and pseudo-clefts, which signal that an assignment of structure within a space is introduced in the pre-suppositional mode. The pre-suppositional mode "allows the structure to be propagated into neighboring spaces for the counterparts of the relevant elements" (Fauconnier, 2007: 372).

3.1.5. Trans-spatial Operators

These are the copulative verbs in English such as 'be', 'become', and 'remain', and they link elements in different spaces (Stockwell, 2002: 97). To show the mechanism that outlines the setting up of spaces and the way meaning is constructed in a piece of discourse, one can account for spaces building as follows:

A piece of discourse will start with a Base B. Space M_1 is then set up subordinate to B, then space M_{11} , subordinate to M_1 , and so on. Returning to the Base B, one can open space M_2 , then M_{21} , and so on, return to B a number of times, opening spaces M_i and daughter spaces M_{ij} , M_{ijk} , and so on. (Fauconnier, 2007: 365)

3.2. Connectors

The function of connectors is to link the constructed mental spaces; "they specify counterparts and projected structures from one space to another. In a simple case, two spaces are connected by only one function and this function reflects some form of identity of the connected counterparts" (Nolan, 2001: 28). According to Dancygier (2002: 355), "connectors ... are crucial to our ability to access counterparts in different spaces and relate referents of various expressions across spaces."

3.3. Access Principle (also Identification (ID) Principle)

Fauconnier (1994: 3) states that "if two objects (in the most general sense), a and b, are linked by a pragmatic function F ($b = F(a)$), a description of a, b_a may be used to identify its counterpart b." What the access principle holds is that "any linguistic expression that names or describes a particular element in a given mental space may be employed in order to access an element in a distinct mental space that is linked to it via a connector" (Evans, 2007: 2). In other words, an element in one space can be accessed by its counterpart element in another space through a counterpart as far as the two spaces are related by connectors.

One key notion to the understanding of the way mental spaces theory works is that of partitioning. The disparate information of an entity in a discourse is represented by virtue of partitioning it into domains or spaces. Coulson (1997: 21) believes that "one

advantage of partitioning information into appropriately structured spaces is that it explains how we can make sense of interactions.” Basically developed to account to discourse which concerns people’s beliefs, desires, fears past and future, mental spaces can be considered as temporal containers for the information of the discourse and processing such information can be better achieved by dividing it into portions. The result of partitioning, however, is a series of simple cognitive models the abstract link between which captures the relationship that holds between elements and their counterparts in other spaces (ibid). Coulson (ibid: 24) refers to this setting up of two distinct spaces by stating that “if extending a space would result in the representation of contradictory information a new space is set up”.

3.4. Base Space, Viewpoint Space, and Focus Space

The base space is the starting point for the construction of spaces and to which it is always possible to return. The viewpoint space is the space from which other spaces are to be accessed and set up. The focus space is the space upon which the attention is currently focused. As the discourse unfolds, participants move through the spaces configurations. Their viewpoint and focus shift as they go from one space to another. Yet, the base space is the one that remains accessible as the starting point for another space construction. Spaces are internally set up by virtue of frames which are cognitive models that represent the speaker's background knowledge (Fauconnier, 1997: 40-49).

4. Analysis of Mental Spaces in Plath's Poem

In the first stanza of Plath's "*Mad Girl Love Song*" Which reads as follows:

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;
I lift my lids and all is born again.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

The mental spaces configuration can be represented as follows:

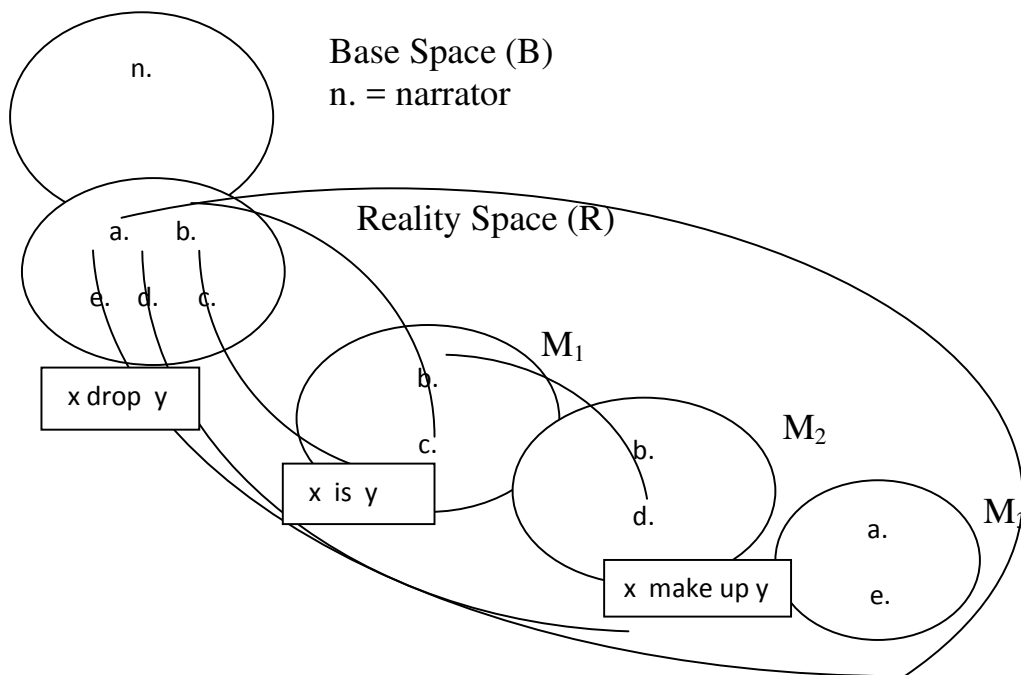


Figure (1): The Mental Spaces Representation of the First Stanza

The narrator describes the state of affairs that her outer world is transformed into when she shuts her eyes or again opens them. The Base space (B) is the context of narration; the here and now of the narrator. It contains the only element (n.) representing the narrator. The Reality space (R) includes element (a) standing for the entity 'I', element (b) representing the entity 'world', element (c) standing for the attribute 'dead', element (d) referring to the attribute 'born' and element (e) referring to the entity 'you'. The first mental space M_1 is set up by the verb form 'shut' which is the space builder in the sentence "I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead". This space includes element (b) associated with element (c) by virtue of the frame: 'x drop y'. It is the viewpoint space. The second mental space M_2 is structured subordinate to the first space M_1 by the space builder 'lift' which is also a verb form that functions as a space builder. This space includes element (b) associated with element (d) by virtue of the frame 'x is y'. The Viewpoint shifts to this newly structured space which is also the Focus space. The third mental space M_3 returns the Focus to the Base space. It is structured by the space builder 'think'. This space includes element (a) associated with element (e) by virtue of the frame: 'x make up y'. This novel space becomes the Focus space, whereas the Viewpoint remains on the second space

The mental configuration of spaces clearly shows that the space builders set up three mental spaces structured from the Reality Space. The first and second ones are connected to the present whereas the third one is related to the past. That is, M_1 and M_2 stand for the way the narrator perceives the world now, whereas M_3 represents the way she saw it in the past. Basically, M_2 is set up subordinate to M_1 which indicates a stronger relationship between these two spaces than that with M_3 which is structured from the Reality space.

In other words, the process of shutting and lifting the eye lids is closely related so as to bring about one eternal reality: the world is still the way it used to be, dead when closing one's eyes and alive when opening them. This space represents the present realization of the narrator. In the third space M_3 , however, the narrator refers to the fact that it is only due to one's own desires that he/she turns this world the way he/she wishes it to be, that is, to see it differently. As for the narrator, she has only lately discovered this truth. She has just realized that she has long been indulged in a whole world of fantasies about the boy whom she thought she loved so dearly. The shift in the tense (from present to past) also emphasizes this reading. Moreover, the title of the poem includes the word 'girl' which indicates the fact that this state of living in fantasies, building a world of other fantastic realities, is typical to this particular period of woman's life when one boy's image constitutes the center around which her day dreams evolve. This image, which turned to be completely made up and not genuine, could not be actualized, had it not been to her immersion in so many fantasies.

The space builders in both M_1 and M_2 ; the verb forms 'shut' and 'lift', indicate a movement that seems to be controlled by the beholder (the eye-owner), i.e. the narrator is able now to have power over the way she speculates about life as it is there without

any misleading interferences, a capacity that she seemed to lack in the past. As for the second stanza, no mental spaces' building is depicted.

In the third stanza which reads as follows:

I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed
And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

Three mental spaces can be traced here, as in the following figure:

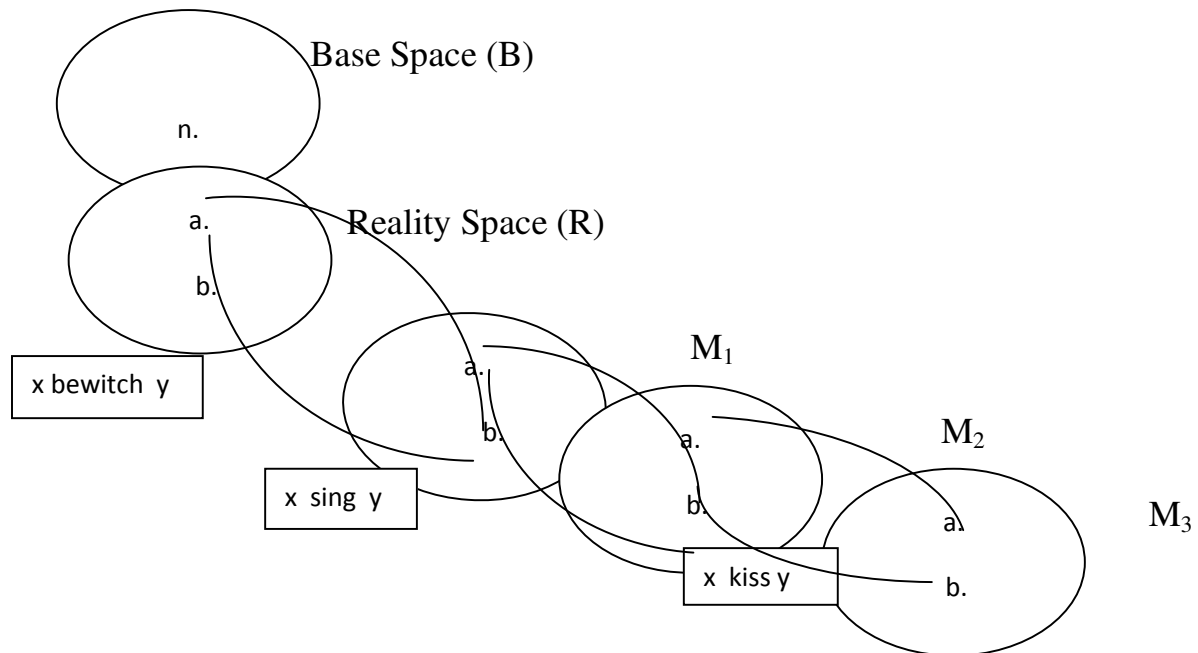


Figure (2): The Mental Spaces Representation of the Third Stanza

In this stanza, the narrator reflects on her dream when she sees her lover, driven by his great passion towards her, shown with his gentle kisses of passionate love. The Reality Space includes element (a) representing the entity 'you', element (b) standing for the entity 'me'. Three mental spaces are set up by the space builder 'dream'. The first one, M_1 , includes element (a) associated with element (b) by virtue of the frame: 'x bewitch y'. This is the Viewpoint space. A second space M_2 is structured subordinate to M_1 . This space contains again element (a) associated with element (b) but this time by virtue of the frame: 'x sing y'. This is now the Focus space and Viewpoint shifts to this new space. The third space M_3 is set up also subordinate to M_1 and it includes element (a) associated with element (b) by virtue of the frame: 'x kiss y'. Focus shifts to this space whereas Viewpoint remains on M_2 .

A close survey of the mental representation of the spaces in the third stanza reveals the fact that a series of spaces is constructed by one space builder, which is the verb 'dream'. These spaces constitute one sweet state of affairs where the narrator is united with her lover bodily and emotionally. The first mental space M_1 includes her, entirely taken by his mannish preeminence that drives her to bed with him in a dream. She is stepping out of her defense because she feels herself absolutely helpless before

his intangible power over her. The word ‘bewitch’ shows the depth of the state of being literally swept away by his manners and words. She is bodily his. As Focus shifts to M_2 , however, it becomes obvious that the second mental space represents a second stage of their move to an ultimate goal which is to melt in one undistinguished harmony. He plays on her attentive senses when he sings to her the songs that agitate all her deepest desires and it turns out that what she actually enjoys is the spiritual satisfaction that his presence beside her brings in. This strongly desired situation is reached at in M_3 when they end up in a magical kiss that summarizes their journey from M_1 to M_2 and finally to M_3 . In other words, the girl’s love is not a temporal lusty one. It does not reside in her wish to fulfill the desire of her growing body but rather in identifying herself as a better human being in a pure and spiritual relationship.

Like the second stanza, the fourth one has no depiction of mental spaces configuration, while the fifth (and last) stanza does. The stanza reads as follows:

I fancied you'd return the way you said,
But I grow old and I forget your name.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

The mental spaces configuration of the above stanza is as represented in the following figure:

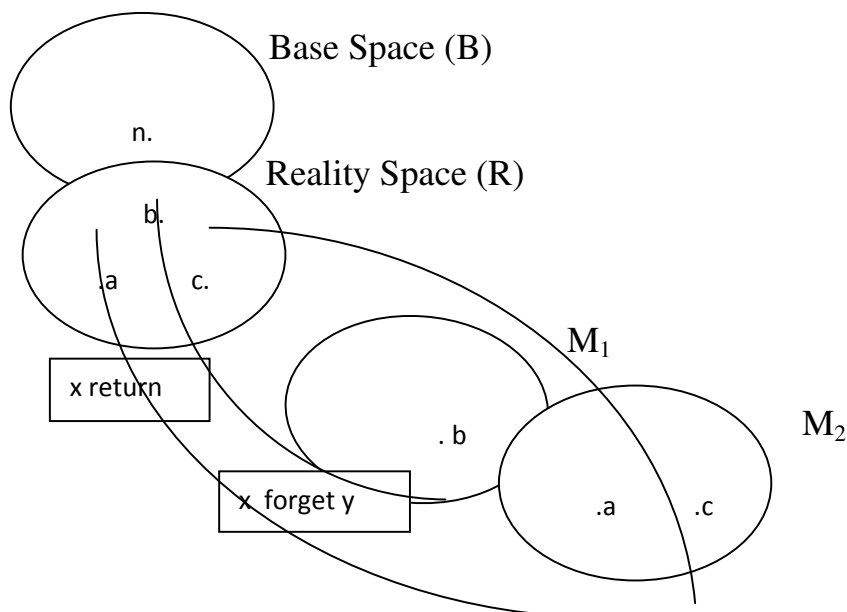


Figure (3): The Mental Spaces Representation of the Fifth Stanza

In the first line of the fifth stanza, the narrator hints at her condition after the boy lover leaves her, probably due to a change in the place. She keeps holding to the faith that he would come back again as he promised but as time passes by, she realizes the painful truth that he would not. The Reality Space includes element (a) representing the entity ‘I’, element (b) standing for the entity ‘you’ and element (c) representing the entity ‘your name’. The first mental space M_1 is set up by the space builder ‘fancied’ in ‘I

fancied you'd return the way you said". This space includes element (b) only by virtue of the frame: 'x return'. It is the Viewpoint space. The second mental space M_2 is structured by the verb 'grow' in "But I grow old and I forgot your name". This space includes element (a) associated with element (c) by virtue of the frame: 'x forget y'. It is the Focus space.

Upon a close look at the mental configuration of the spaces, it becomes clear that two spaces are actually constructed from the Reality Space. The first one represents a remote point in the past where the girl is haunted by the idea that her boyfriend is coming back soon. The second one refers to a later point in the past when she gives up the idea and forgets all about him. The long span of time, however, could not have been adequately expressed had it not been in the light of mental spaces framework where the two crucial periods of time are represented in two distinguished spaces. The narrator does not prepare the stage for such a great shift in her emotions or give a clue about the passage of time that involved the shift to take place; yet, it becomes obvious from the mental representation of spaces that too much had actually happened within these two spaces. For instance, in M_1 , there is only one element (b) which stands for the boy-lover. This element is not connected to the girl or to any other element. It means that his return relates to his own wish only, that he may choose to come back or not, whereas the girl thought that his coming back for her is inevitable which proved to be completely mistaken. In M_2 , however, he eventually does not come back and the girl is associated not with the boy but with his name merely, the one which she ends up now forgetting. Remarkably enough though, the boy and girl are till now never associated in one space, as if their being together is doomed to be beyond reach. A final remark to be said is that all the mental spaces in the poem are woven together by the repetition of the last lines that bring the reader again back to the first point indicating that human consciousness is a dynamicity of spaces of not only sensations of reality of the present, but fantasies, wishes, dreams, feelings of all times: past, present, and future.

5. Conclusion

The above analysis, simple though, might have indicated the powerful analytical means Mental Spaces Theory could provide for the analysis of Plath's poem in particular and poetry in general. It is by no means exhaustive or the only one, however, this is the case that used to be with interpreting poetry; always there are other alternative interpretations. Anyway, we think the analysis presented here can be said to be, to some degree, objective and insightful, and this is specifically what stylistics, of which cognitive stylistics is a modern trend, in one sense, purports to give.

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Appendix

Plath's Poem

Mad Girl's Love Song

I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead;
I lift my lids and all is born again.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

The stars go waltzing out in blue and red,
And arbitrary blackness gallops in:
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I dreamed that you bewitched me into bed
And sung me moon-struck, kissed me quite insane.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade:
Exit seraphim and Satan's men:
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

I fancied you'd return the way you said,
But I grow old and I forget your name.
(I think I made you up inside my head.)

I should have loved a thunderbird instead;
At least when spring comes they roar back again.
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.
(I think I made you up in my head.)"

Sylvia Plath

الخلاصة

لقد تعددت المناهج التي تتناول الأدب وفي هذا السياق تمثل نظرية الفضاءات المتعددة ، وهي إحدى نظريات علم اللغة الإدراكي ، منهاجاً واعدت لتحليل النصوص الأدبية عموماً والنصوص الشعرية على وجه الخصوص. وفي هذا الإطار يحاول البحث تقديم قراءة أسلوبية لقصيدة "أغنية حب فتاة مجنونة" للشاعرة سيلفيا بلاث من خلال تطبيق نظرية الفضاءات المتعددة لجايل فوكونير. وقد ثبت أن النظرية مفيدة كأداة تحليل أدبي.