



## **The Master and Margarita: An Analysis**

Author unknown

This four-page undergraduate paper examines the themes of Michael Bulgakov's Stalinist era novel, *The Master and Margarita*. The author analyzes the analogies, discusses the significance of the interwoven stories, and explores the New Testament aspects of the book.

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The Master and Margarita

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## **The Master and Margarita: An Analysis**

Mikhail Bulgakov wrote *The Master and Margarita* during the brutal Stalinist purges of the nineteen-thirties, and expressed an anti-Stalinist theme through a complicated allegory of good and evil. As an example of protest literature, *The Master and Margarita* is unique for its structural strangeness, for it is a novel within a novel, and is paced by multiple narratives which raise profoundly troubling questions about human nature, atheism, totalitarianism, and human society.

The chief character in *The Master and Margarita* is Satan, who disguises himself as a foreigner and self-proclaimed black magician by the name of Woland. Satan's henchmen are a raggedy group of dirty, bizarre-looking outcasts who plot and scheme their way into Soviet society. This portrayal is significant, for the Bolsheviks of Lenin were a ragged group of odd misfits who plotted and schemed their way to power in Russia.

One of the many psychological themes of this compelling book involves the reactions of the supposedly rational, atheist citizens of Moscow to Woland's powers. This of course is an analogy that compares their similar reactions to Stalin's powers. Just as the citizens of Moscow are willing to accept unbelievable events perpetrated by Woland if it benefits them, the citizens of the Soviet Union were willing to accept unbelievable Stalinist policies when it benefited them.

Both reactions are absurd and irrational. Satan is a monster and so was Stalin.

They both victimize everyone sooner or later. It is just a matter of time before the price of accommodating evil must be paid, for living in Stalinist Russia required a Faustian pact with the devil (Barkov) and by the time communism fell everyone in the Soviet Union had suffered. In the meantime, Stalin and his heirs took great satisfaction in manipulating people, and savored the power they had over others. So did Woland, which is to be expected, for in the novel he is in fact Stalin.

The vodka-swilling cat is another interesting analogy in *The Master and Margarita*, for it represents the common Russian trait of drowning one's troubles in alcohol. Most Russians drink vodka like water, which is understandable, because for most Russians in the communist era, and in the long tsarist era before 1917, alcohol was the only comfort they could find in life.

Sorting out the three separate plots in this novel is well worth the effort, for Bulgakov offers numerous insights into the human condition, and weaves these three stories together in order to better emphasize his themes. As we have discussed, one story concerns the visit to Stalinist Moscow of Satan disguised as Woland, who terrorizes the capital's intellectual community just as Stalin actually did, and for the same reasons. In this story, Bulgakov satirizes communist society and exposes the inner hypocrisy nearly everyone was guilty of, especially the intellectual elites. (Barkov)

The second story of course has clear New Testament overtones, for it involves a character by the unique and rather recognizable name of Pontius Pilate who encounters a wandering spiritual man named Yeshua. Jesus of Nazareth of course was an itinerant spiritual figure, whose name in Hebrew was Yeshua. Bulgakov had an agenda here, for in Stalinist times it was illegal and mortally dangerous to criticize anything about the Soviet Union, so Bulgakov disguised his criticisms of Soviet society by criticizing biblical societies. (Barkov)

To balance this, biblical aspects of *The Master and Margarita* involving baptism,

the trinity, and resurrection occur in the city of Moscow. Russians are a sophisticated literary people, so most of Bulgakov's readers understood what he was up to and appreciated his insights and the powerful, entertaining manner in which he expressed his themes. They could see very well who was who, why they acted as they did, and what the consequences were. (Barkov)

Through the interactions of Pontius Pilate and Jeshua, it seems that Bulgakov was saying that the godless society that was Russia under Stalin's communism had no understanding of the divine, and because it didn't it was doomed to soon degenerate into despair and disaster. He couldn't actually say that openly in the nineteen-thirties USSR (Barkov) so he said it through a New Testament analogy involving Pontius Pilate and Jesus Christ.

Finally, there is the story of the separated lovers, the Master and Margarita, whose tale is interwoven between the other two stories. The Master allowed his critics to destroy his literary career, while Margarita had to watch him fall apart over the rejection of his retelling of Pontius Pilate's story. Woland takes a special evil interest in these two separated lovers, and encounters Margarita at a critical moment when she may be tempted to offer him too much for a reunion with her beloved Master. Theirs is a touching and unforgettable love story which balances all of the evil, loathing, hypocrisy, and despair in the novel.

It should be noted that the brilliance of this novel is not just its satire, but the masterful way in which Bulgakov links the three stories together to make a profound literary statement about life. In the context of the New Testament, it is especially effective how he links Pontius Pilate's interaction with Jesus to the desolate life of The Master and his lover Margarita by developing parallel plots that harmonically blend together as the novel reaches its climax.

In conclusion, Mikhail Bulgakov wrote *The Master and Margarita* during the brutal Stalinist purges of the nineteen-thirties, and expressed an anti-Stalinist theme through a complicated allegory of good and evil. Bulgakov's novel is structured in three parts, but is not only a satiric tale about the strange characters in these three plotlines, it is also about the absurdity of communist politics, the evils of hypocrisy, and the hollowness of literary pretensions. In a larger political sense, it is about oppression and persecution, and in a moral sense, it is about courage, devotion, and the power of love.

Most Russian readers can't praise this novel enough, for they understand the analogies, know who is symbolic of whom, and can relate to the emotions, motivations, and weaknesses of the characters. But many other readers fail to appreciate it adequately because they are unfamiliar with Soviet history, Russian culture, or the power of satire. This is unfortunate, for *The Master and Margarita* is a masterpiece.

## **Sources**

Barkov, Alfred. "Michael Bulgakov's *The Master and the Margarita*: A Literary Mystification." Online. Available: <http://bulgakov.stormloader.com/>. 21 May 2003.

Bulgakov, Michael. *The Master and the Margarita*. New York: Vintage Books, 1996.

[Attached source](#)

## **MIKHAIL BULGAKOV'S THE MASTER AND MARGARITA: A LITERARY MYSTIFICATION**

**by Alfred Barkov**

There has been developed a new Literary Theory incorporating Mikhail Bakhtin's concepts. Based on the principles of philosophical aesthetics, semiotics and narratology, the theory made it possible to address the problem of revealing the hidden content of Mikhail Bulgakov's works including his famous novel *The Master and Margarita*. The theoretical aspects and their practical implementation in decoding the inner structure (i.e., the hidden content) of similar works created by W. Shakespeare and A. Pushkin are discussed elsewhere on the WEB (see the index below).

This page contains the text of my book M. Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita: an everlasting love or a literary mystification?* A short version of the work was published in 1996 (*The Novels Eugene Onegin and The Master and Margarita: a Tradition of Literary Mystification: 1996, Kiev, Stanitsa.*) However short, it contains the first ever description of the sophisticated multiple-plot inner structure of such class of fiction (the menippeah).

As the texts published on the Mikhail Bulgakov page are in Russian, the table of contents of the book is in Russian as well. To enable the readers who do not read Russian to get an idea of the content intended by Bulgakov, I will attempt to present a brief description with some links to corresponding documents.

It should be noted that the traditional interpretation of *The Master and Margarita* ignores the facts delineating the true Bulgakov's intention. The novel turned out to be a bitter satire aimed at the Soviet repressive regime. It depicts V. Lenin as devil Woland who brought disaster to Russia. The satirical characters of Master and Margarita do not depict Bulgakov and his third wife as it is traditionally believed. The Master represents the odious figure of M. Gorky, whom the Soviet regime officially endowed with the functions of supervising the whole literary process in the Soviet Russia.

The image of Margarita reflects the odious figure of unofficial Gorky's wife Maria Andreyeva, a myrmidon of V. Lenin. It was on Lenin's demand that Maria Andreyeva involved gifted writer M. Gorky into the Bolshevik's activities. That very situation has been satirically described in the *Master and Margarita*.

A more detailed analysis of the multiple reflections pointing to Lenin, Gorky and Andreyeva as being depicted as Woland, the Master, and Margarita has been presented in my earlier book *Mikhail Bulgakov's Novel The Master and Margarita: a New Approach*.

Should the true content of *The Master and Margarita* be disclosed in the thirties, Mikhail Bulgakov most certainly would have been executed.

On this page I render the content of my next work on *The Master and Margarita*. In it, the emphasis has been made on the aspects characterizing the inner structure of the novel. Actually, this is the very first work containing an attempt to reveal the 'secret key' to the inner structure of the masterpieces created by Shakespeare, Pushkin, and Bulgakov. A more detailed description of the menippeah class of fiction was published two years later (see the text of the book on the novel *Eugene Onegin* by Alexander Pushkin). In 2000 there was published the paper describing the decoded content of *Hamlet* (see on the WEB a rendering in English: *Hamlet: a Tragedy of errors or the Tragical Fate of the Author?*).

A very important feature should be stressed. In all menippeahs created by Shakespeare, Pushkin, and Bulgakov the principal compositional 'secret' is the role of the Narrator whose biased narrative is deliberately aimed at indoctrinating the readers with a false perception of the 'real' content. Among other composition means, this strictly psychological method involves intense wordplay. Due to the inflicted impression, we are apt to perceive the meaning of the words and expressions according to what the Narrator implants, thus neglecting the appropriate interpretations. This phenomenon takes place even when we read such works written in our native language. The situation becomes especially grave when we read a translation. Of the multiple meanings of words in the original text, the interpreter would certainly choose in his language a word magnifying the Narrator's intention but stripped of the alternative original meanings. Therefore, any attempt to perceive the true content of a menippeah translated without considering the true author's intention is futile. Factually, the readers of such translations are deprived of any chance to approach the text from a different position. To a foreign reader without a command in Russian, *The Master and Margarita* must seem even more cryptic than to a Russian.

Unfortunately, all that is true with the translations of *The Master and Margarita* into English. With the real content in mind, it becomes only too evident that many of the key words and expressions should be translated differently so as to preserve the alternative meaning intended by Bulgakov. One of the latest translations, namely:

THE MASTER & MARGARITA By Mikhail Bulgakov. Translated by Diana Burgin and Katherine Tiernan O'Connor. Annotations and afterword by Ellendea Proffer. 367 pp. Dana Point, Calif.: Ardis Publishers. \$35. (*The New York Times*, October 22, 1995, p. 32).

is no exception. Besides, based on the standard pro-Soviet interpretation, Dr. Ellendea Proffer's annotations lead the readers still further away from what Mikhail Bulgakov intended. I would like to warn the readers against trusting the black PR type marketing inventions:

Its author, Mikhail Bulgakov, had written two versions, one he had worked on at home and another he wrote while he was living with a mistress — and did not have the original one in front of him — before he died in 1940. In 1989 a version different from the 1973 one was published in Bulgakov's native Kiev, and it is on that edition that Diana Burgin and Katherine Tiernan O'Connor rely for their new translation. (*ibid.*)

Mikhail Bulgakov never lived at his mistress place. The mistress in question was his would be third wife Yelena Sergeyevna Bulgakova. Before Bulgakov married her in 1932, she peacefully lived with her husband and their son, and there was no room for a lover be him Mikhail Bulgakov or somebody else. After having moved to Bulgakov's place in 1932, they never separated till March 1940 when Bulgakov died. The two allegedly controversial versions were created after 1936 — well after Bulgakov officially married Yelena Sergeyevna. These versions reflect different stages of work on the text, and there are no drastic differences between them. What was published by Ellendea Proffer is merely an earlier and less accurate version than the canonized ultimate one.

The content of the beautifully designed US based WEB sites featuring the issues of *The Master and Margarita* is grounded on the same misleading translations and erroneous interpretations. Maybe I will be able to publish sometime a description in English of the key elements which still remain unnoticed by the scholars and commentators of *The Master and Margarita*. As there are plenty of such elements in its text, re-editing the comments contained in two books (more than fifty chapters all in all) let alone the process of translating is going to be a bulky job. And again, there still remains the lingual problem: the existing translations are useless because they were performed without the consideration of Bulgakov's intention and the significance of the key elements.

I believe it would have been more proper if I began the job with the rendering the content of my first 300 p. book. Yet I can offer now only a very brief description of the second one devoted to the revealing of the content of *The Master and Margarita*.

Besides the Preface, the book consists of 23 chapters comprising six sections:

Section I consists of 4 chapters devoted to the issues of the Literary Theory. Among other things, a possibility of strict syllogistic proofs in philological studies is discussed in Chapter III. A description of the unique multi-plot multi-subject menippeah inner structure is presented in Chapter IV. (A more elaborated description of the theory can be found in my other book: *The Promenades with Eugene Onegin*, as well as in the articles published on the Literary Theory page.)

Section II (Chapters V through IX) is devoted to the description of the complicated inner structure of Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita*. This was the very first time when the issue of the Narrator as the main means of the composition in menippeahs is discussed. Maybe the most striking thing for the scholars engaged in the studies concerning Mikhail Bulgakov's works is the identity of the Narrator and his specific role in the comprehension of the true content of *The Master and Margarita*. The complete text of the novel is narrated by Koroviev-Fagot, a character from Dr. Woland's gang. Yes, it's not Master or Margarita but Koroviev who happens to be the principal character of *The Master and Margarita* novel. This compositional significance of the Narrator is the key feature of any menippeah. (I am in a position to assert that the scholars engaged in the Shakespearean studies will have to admit the fact that prince Hamlet is not the central character within the true plot intended by Shakespeare).

In Section III containing Chapters X — XII the content of multiple plots and subjects of *The Master and Margarita* is analyzed. It is argued that the novel itself parodies the *Faust and the City*, a procommunist drama by A. Lunacharsky, the head of the department of Culture of the Soviet Union. Being one of the most principal ideologists of totalitarian rule, Lunacharsky was the very person who organized the anti-Bulgakov campaign in the twenties. Unfortunately, even in the post-Soviet studies, the odious Lunacharsky's policy still remains shadowed. (See Chapter XI. *The Godfather of the Socialist Realism*.)

In the novel *The Master and Margarita*, A. Lunacharsky is depicted as two different characters: as Latunsky — one of the leading figures in the anti-Master campaign (see how accurately the Latunsky name fits into that of Bulgakov's antagonist), and as Sempleyarov, the Director of Theatres and Shows (which exactly specifies the official position of A. Lunacharsky).

As far as I know, no other study devoted to *The Master and Margarita* mentions Lunacharsky as a satirical object let alone the fact that Bulgakov's novel parodies his drama *Faust and the City*. Traditionally, the attitude to Lunacharsky in the Soviet studies has always been respectful. The study of the text of *Faust and the City* has made it only too obvious that while creating *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov incorporated the text of Lunacharsky's drama very extensively. When the book was completed, I was still wondering why Bulgakov constructed the main plot of *The Master and Margarita* in such a way that multiple details and situations of *Faust and the City* became objects of parody.

It was only recently that P. Maslak having decoded the hidden content of the very first Bulgakov's novel *The White Guard 1* discovered that its plot also parodies Lunacharsky's *Faust and the City*. In this case the parody is even more obvious because in Bulgakov's novel the symbolical notion of the City parodies that employed by Lunacharsky in his drama (in both cases the word City is capitalized, and Bulgakov stressed that feature.)

Section IV (Chapters XII — XVI) is devoted to the ethical issues covered in *The Master and Margarita* as well as to some aspects of Mikhail Bulgakov's biography reflected in the novel. It was disclosed that in the twenties and in the thirties Bulgakov remained to be a drug addict, that his third wife Yelena Bulgakova assisted him in obtaining the drugs (see Chapter XV.) This very situation with the drug injection has been depicted in the Epilogue to *The Master and Margarita* where Bulgakov portrayed himself as Ivan Bezdomny (Ponyryev).

In Chapter XVI the situation connected with the famous 1930 Bulgakov's Letter to the Government is analyzed. As a result, there has been disclosed the identity of the secret police contact who had been reporting on Bulgakov. The text of the contact's April 1930 secret report concerning the letter in question was published recently in mass media. That secret police contact happened to be Bulgakov's third wife Yelena Bulgakova who was then still the spouse of a high standing Red Army officer (Bulgakov married her in 1932).

In the Chapters XVII — XX comprising Section V, the multiple references in *The Master and Margarita* to A. Pushkin's versed novel *Eugene Onegin* are analyzed. It was established that the content of Pushkin's novel had been interpreted incorrectly. *Eugene Onegin* happens to be a menippeah as well, and it was intended by Alexander Pushkin as a satirical mystification. It has become obvious that Bulgakov was aware of the real content of Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and signaled about that in *The Master and Margarita*.

The XXIst, XXIInd and XXIIIrd Chapters comprising Section VI are devoted to structural features which are common in the menippeahs created by Pushkin, Bulgakov and Alexei Tolstoy. The XXIVth chapter describing the hidden content of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* was withdrawn because it has become a separate paper (see the text of *Hamlet: A Tragedy of Errors or the Tragical Fate of the Author?*). It should be mentioned that at least one of Bulgakov's dramas (*The Cabala of the Devotees*) is factually a novel belonging to the menippeah class with the hidden content much differing from the traditional interpretation (see Chapter XXII.) That feature makes its inner structure very much alike that of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. (In the paper on *Hamlet* mentioned above I dare to assert that considering the true inner structure and the hidden content, *Hamlet* appears to be a prosaic novel rather than a pentametre drama, the later being an inner drama within the main prosaic text. The content intended by Shakespeare also differs very much from the traditional interpretation).