



## **The Master and Margarita** BookRags Literature Study Guide

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The Master and Margarita

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## Introduction

*The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov is considered one of the best and most highly regarded novels to come out of Russia during the Soviet era. The book weaves together satire and realism, art and religion, history and contemporary social values. It features three story lines. The main story, taking place in Russia of the 1930s, concerns a visit by the devil, referred to as Professor Woland, and four of his assistants during Holy Week; they use black magic to play tricks on those who cross their paths. Another story line features the Master, who has been languishing in an insane asylum, and his love, Margarita, who seeks Woland's help in being reunited with the Master. A third story, which is presented as a novel written by the Master, depicts the crucifixion of Yeshua Ha-Notsri, or Jesus Christ, by Pontius Pilate.

Using the fantastic elements of the story, Bulgakov satirizes the greed and corruption of Stalin's Soviet Union, in which people's actions were controlled as well as their perceptions of reality. In contrast, he uses a realistic style in telling the story of Yeshua. The holy life led by Christ in this book is more ordinary than the miraculous one told in the Scriptures. Because the book derides government bureaucracy and corruption, the manuscript of *The Master and Margarita* was hidden for over twenty years, until the more lenient Khrushchev government allowed its publication.

## Author Biography

In his final weeks, as he lay dying of nephrosclerosis, Mikhail Bulgakov continued to dictate changes for *The Master and Margarita* to his wife. He had been working on the book for twelve years, through eight versions, and he meant it to be his literary legacy.

Bulgakov was born in Kiev on May 3, 1891. His father was a professor at the Kiev Theological Seminary, an influence that appears in the novel through mentions of the history and philosophy of religious matters. Bulgakov graduated with distinction from the University of Kiev, and after attaining his medical degree from St. Vladimir's University, he went into the army, which sent him to a small town in the province of Smolensk. It was 1916, and Russia was involved in the First World War. The autobiographical stories in Bulgakov's collection *A Country Doctor's Notebooks* are based on his experiences in Smolensk.

Bulgakov returned to Kiev in 1918, but was drafted into the White Army to fight in Russia's civil war against the communist Red Army. On a train trip home from Northern Caucasus, where the army had sent him, he sat up all night writing his first short story, and when the train stopped he took the story to the local newspaper office, which promptly published it. The following year, 1920, Bulgakov gave up medicine and moved to Moscow to write full time. He had several books published and several plays produced. His greatest success was the play *Days of the Turbins*, which was his adaptation for the stage of his own novel *The White Guard*. The story features a family that suffers at the hands of the Communists during the revolution, a depiction that would earn Bulgakov the suspicion of the Communists, who by then controlled the government. Despite the Communist reaction, Soviet Union audiences would applaud the play. From 1925 to 1928, the author was affiliated with the Moscow Arts Theater, where he had an uneasy relationship with the theater's founder and director, Konstantin Stanislavsky, who is known today for developing the theatrical technique referred to as "Method acting."

In 1929, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers became the official government agency overseeing the political content of literary works. Bulgakov found himself unable to publish because his ideologies did not conform to those of the Communists. In frustration, he burned many of his manuscripts in 1930. He wrote an appeal directly to Joseph Stalin, the secretary general of the Communist Party and leader of the country. Stalin had been a fan of *Days of the Turbins*, and by his order Bulgakov was reinstated into the Art Theater. For the next ten years, Bulgakov wrote, directed, and sometimes acted, and he worked on *The Master and Margarita*.

Upon his death in 1940, he instructed his wife to hide the manuscript of *The Master and Margarita*, because he was afraid that it would be confiscated and destroyed by government censors. It was not published for another twenty-seven years, when the government of the Soviet Union had become more open to intellectual differences to the party line. Until the publication of *The Master and Margarita* in an English translation in 1967, few people outside of the Soviet Union had ever heard of Bulgakov. In subsequent years, his other novels, short stories, plays, essays, and his autobiography have been published, as well as numerous publications about his life and works.

## Plot Summary

Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* is split into three different, yet intertwined, versions of reality: events in present-day Moscow, including the adventures of satanic visitors, events concerning the crucifixion of Yeshua Ha-Notsri, or Jesus Christ, in first-century Yershalaim, and the love story of the Master and Margarita.

### Wednesday

Mikhail Alexandrovich Berlioz, an important literary figure, and Ivan Nikolayevich Ponyryov, a poet who is also known as Bezdomny, which means "homeless," meet at Patriarch's Ponds to discuss a commissioned poem that Berlioz had asked Ivan to pen. Berlioz would like Ivan to rewrite the poem because he believes the poem makes Jesus too real. He goes on to explain why he believes Jesus never existed, providing Ivan with a brief history of religion. Berlioz is eventually interrupted by a mysterious man named Professor Woland, who assures them that Jesus did indeed exist. When Berlioz objects, Woland begins the story of Pontius Pilate, but not before he tells Berlioz he will be decapitated before the day is out.

The story shifts to Yershalaim, where Pilate is hearing Yeshua's case. Yeshua is accused of inciting the people to burn down the temple, as well as advocating the overthrow of Emperor Tiberius. Pilate is forced to try him, and Yeshua is sentenced to death. Back in Moscow, Berlioz is indeed later decapitated by a streetcar. After Berlioz is killed, Ivan confronts and chases Woland and his gang— a choirmaster, Korovyov, and a huge tomcat, Behemoth—through the streets to no avail. When he tries to relate the happenings of the day, he is taken to the asylum.

### Thursday

Styopa Likhodeyev, Berlioz's flat mate and director of the Variety Theater, awakes with a hangover to find Woland waiting for him. Woland apprises Likhodeyev that he has agreed to let Woland make seven performances of black magic at his theater. Likhodeyev does not remember having made this agreement. Contracts do contain Likhodeyev's signature; it seems that Woland is manipulating the situation, but Likhodeyev is bound to the agreement. Once a dazed Likhodeyev realizes that he must allow Woland to perform, Woland introduces the theater director to his entourage— Behemoth, Korovyov, and the single-fanged Azazello—and announces that they need apartment number 50, which has a reputation for being cursed (tenants of the apartment usually end up missing after a while). It is revealed that Woland and his group do not think highly of Styopa; they believe people like him in high places are scoundrels.

Styopa soon finds himself transported to Yalta. The satanic gang spread mayhem throughout the building, and the manager has foreign money planted on him and is taken away by the police. The manager of the Variety Theater, Ivan Savelyevich Varenuvka, attempts to find Styopa, who has been sending desperate telegrams from Yalta. At the same time, he, with the help of others, is trying to ascertain the identity of the mysterious Woland. To prevent inquiries by Varenuvka, Woland sends a new infernal creature, Hella, to Varenuvka, and she turns him into a vampire.

At the Variety Theater, Woland and his entourage give a black magic performance, during which the master of ceremonies is decapitated, and bewitched money—which later turns into bottle labels, kittens, and sundry objects—is rained over the crowd. Meanwhile, back at the asylum, Ivan meets his neighbor—the hero of the tale, the Master. He tells him about the previous day's events, and the Master assures him that Woland is Satan. The Master then tells him about his own life. He is an aspiring novelist and married, but he reveals he is in love with his "secret wife," Margarita, who is also married. His novel—the Pontius Pilate story—was their obsession, but critics lambasted it after it was offered for publication. Maddened, the Master had burned the manuscript, and ended up at the asylum.

Later, Ivan dreams the next part of Pilate's story: Condemned men are walking to their executions; Levi Matvei watches them hang and feels responsible. Then he grows angry and curses God. A storm comes, and the prisoners are put humanely to death by a guard stabbing them under the pretext of giving them water.

## Friday

Woland and his group are still wreaking havoc in Moscow, and Margarita is pining over her love, the Master, and she rereads what is left of the Master's novel. She then goes to a park where she sees Berlioz's funeral and meets Azazello, who sets up a meeting between Margarita and Woland. He also gives Margarita some cream, telling her it will make her feel better. After she smears the cream over her body, she becomes a witch. Azazello contacts her and tells her to fly to the river for the meeting with Woland. She flies naked over the city and, on the way, destroys the critic Latunsky's apartment for he had been the one who ruined the Master. Her maid Natasha, now a witch, and Nikolai Ivanovich, now a pig, join her after using the cream.

They meet Woland and his followers, and Satan's ball takes place with Margarita as the hostess. A parade of both famous and commonplace evil people attend, and the ball climaxes with the murder of Baron Maigel. Margarita drinks blood, and opens her eyes to find the ball is over. Woland grants Margarita a wish for being the hostess of the ball. She chooses to be reunited with her lover, the Master. He soon appears before Margarita. The Master is confused at first, but he soon realizes that he is reunited with the woman he loves. Woland also has a copy of the Master's entire manuscript even though the Master had burned it, and he gives it to the Master. He then returns the Master and Margarita and other characters, including Nikolai Ivanovich and Varenuvka, back to their lives as they wish. Natasha however chooses to remain a witch.

The Pilate story continues and Pilate meets with the chief of the secret police, Afranius. He premonishes that Judas of Kerioth, the man who betrayed Yeshua, will be murdered, and indeed, he is later lured outside of the city and murdered. Afranius reports the murder of Kerioth to Pilate, as well as the burial of the criminals. In a conversation with Levi (who was found to have taken Yeshua's body after the execution), Pilate reveals that it was he who killed Kerioth.

## Saturday

An investigation into the strange events incited by Woland and his group begins, while Ivan is possessed by visions of Pilate and the bald hill on which Yeshua and the two other criminals had been executed. A shoot-out occurs in apartment number 50 between the investigators and Behemoth, but, surprisingly, no one is hurt. Instead, the building burns. Behemoth and Korovyov continue to perform more pranks that leave many areas of Moscow burning.

Levi comes to Woland with a message from Yeshua: he requests that Woland give the Master "peace." Woland agrees, and Azazello gives poisoned wine to the Master and Margarita. Their bodies die and the couple flies off with the infernal creatures, who, as they fly, return to their real figures. They soon come upon a man and his dog. Woland states that the man is the hero of the Master's novel: Pontius Pilate. He claims that Pilate has been sitting in the same spot for the past two thousand years with his dog, Banga. The Master is allowed to set Pilate free from his immortal insomnia by creating and stating the final line of his novel; he yells, "Free! Free! He is waiting for you!" Pilate and Banga are finally able to leave their static existence and be with Yeshua. The Master and Margarita are not given enlightenment, but they are allowed to spend the rest of eternity together in a small cottage.

## Characters

### Azazello

Azazello is the harshest and most sinister member of Woland's band, the one who will physically attack an opponent rather than simply play tricks. He is a short, broad-shouldered disfigured man with a bowler hat and red hair. His face is described as being "like a crash" and a fang protrudes from his mouth. It is Azazello who is sent to recruit Margarita to host the devil's ball, although he is not comfortable with this responsibility: he is awkward around women and thinks that one of the other servants who has more charm should have been sent to talk to her. He gives Margarita the cream that she rubs onto her body to become a witch. His true character, revealed in the parting scene, is that of "the demon of the waterless desert."

## **Behemoth**

Behemoth, one of the novel's most memorable figures, is a huge black cat who walks on his hind legs and has many humanlike qualities: he pays for his trolley fare, drinks brandy from glasses, fires guns, and more. At the black magic show at the Variety Theater, it is Behemoth who twists the head off of the master of ceremonies. When the apartment at 302B Sadovaya Street is raided by police, Behemoth takes a gun and stages a shoot-out with them; although it is later determined that, even after the firing of hundreds of bullets, nobody on either side was injured. Behemoth burns the apartment with kerosene, and then does the same to Griboyedov House, the headquarters of MAS-SOLIT. In the end he is revealed to not really be a cat at all, but "a slim youth, a page demon, the greatest jester there had ever been."

## **Mikhail Alexandrovich Berlioz**

Mikhail Alexandrovich Berlioz is the editor of one of Moscow's most fashionable literary magazines and a member of the management committee of MASSOLIT, the most prominent literary association in Moscow. The novel opens with Berlioz in the park discussing the historical evidence of Jesus Christ with Ivan. Woland interrupts with his own story about Pontius Pilate, and minutes later he prophesies that Berlioz will not make it to the meeting to which he is going; instead, he will have his head cut off by a woman. Leaving the park, Berlioz slips and falls under a trolley car, driven by a woman, and the wheels cut his head off. Later, during the devil's ball, his head is brought in on a platter, still alive and aware.

## **Bezdomny**

See Ivan Nikolayich Ponyryov

## **Nikanor Ivanovich Bosoi**

Nikanor Ivanovich Bosoi, whose surname means "barefooted," is the chairman of the tenants' association of 302B Sadovaya Street, the building where Berlioz and Likhodeyev shared an apartment. After signing a one-week lease with Woland, Bosoi accepts a bribe, and takes it home and hides it in an air duct in his apartment. Woland calls the police to report the bribery, and Bosoi is arrested.

## **Fagot**

See Korovyov

## **Yeshua Ha-Notsri**

In the version of the crucifixion told by Woland and the Master in this book, Jesus has a different name; he is known as Yeshua Ha-Notsri.

Yeshua is presented as a simple man, not braver nor more intelligent than most, but more moral. Like the Jesus of Biblical tradition, he fascinates Pilate with the meek humanity of his ideas, but unlike the Jesus of the Bible he does not display a sense of security about the overall rightness of his death. The most striking aspect of Yeshua's conversation is that he believes in the goodness of all humans, even those who are cruelly persecuting him: "There are no evil people on earth," he tells Pilate.

## **Nikolai Ivanovich**

Nikolai Ivanovich is a neighbor of Margarita's who also rubs the special cream on himself that had turned Margarita into a witch. Instead of taking on witchlike qualities, he is turned into a hog.

## Jesus

See Yeshua Ha-Notsri

## Homeless

See Ivan Nikolayich Ponyryov

## Korovyov

Korovyov is one of Woland's associates, who identifies himself as Woland's interpreter. He first appears at Patriarch's Ponds, near the place where Berlioz dies. He is described as a lanky man wearing pince-nez glasses, a jockey cap, and a plaid suit. It is Korovyov who gives a bribe to Bosoi, and then calls the authorities to report him. As Woland and his entourage prepare to leave Moscow, it is revealed that Korovyov is not the buffoon he has presented himself as, but is a knight who once made "an ill-timed joke" and has been sentenced to serve Woland in this form because of it.

## Stepan Bogdanovich Likhodeyev

The manager of the Variety Theater, Stepan Bogdanovich Likhodeyev, wakes up one morning after a night of drinking and finds that he has signed Woland to a week-long engagement at the theater.

## Margarita Nikolayevna

Margarita Nikolayevna is the mistress of the writer known as the Master. In the past, when he was distraught about the novel, she comforted and nursed him. He gave all of his money to her for safekeeping, but then was arrested and taken away to the asylum. At a certain point, Margarita is asked to be the hostess of the devil's ball. Once she has a taste of witchcraft—invisibility and the ability to fly—she is glad to perform this duty. In return for her help, Woland offers to grant Margarita a wish. She wishes to be reunited with her beloved Master.

## Master

The Master is an author who has written a book about Pontius Pilate. "I no longer have a name," he tells Ivan when they meet at the mental hospital, where they both are incarcerated. While there, the Master explains his past to the poet. He once was an historian (which is the same profession that Ivan settles into at the end of the book), but when he won a large sum in the lottery, he quit his job to work on his book. One day he met Margarita, with whom he fell hopelessly in love. When she took the novel around to publishers, it came back rejected, and then, even though it was unpublished, the reviewers attacked it in the newspapers. In a fit of insanity, imagining that an octopus was trying to drown him with its ink, the Master burned his book. He gave what was left of his savings to Margarita for safe keeping, but he was soon arrested and put in the asylum, and he never saw her again.

In the mental hospital, the Master has a stolen set of keys that allows him to escape, but he has nowhere to go. Margarita's reward for helping with the devil's ball is her reunion with the Master. Woland arranges for them to return to the Master's old apartment, for his bank account to be restored, for him to receive identification papers and, miraculously, for the burned novel to return to its original condition. In the end, at the request of Jesus, Woland takes the Master with him when he leaves the world: Jesus cannot take him because "He has not earned light, he has earned peace." Margarita joins him, of course, and they are never separated again.

## Levi Matvei

Unlike the traditional stories of Jesus in the New Testament of the Bible, Yeshua has only one disciple in this story. Levi Matvei follows the philosophical vagabond Yeshua Ha-Notsri around, writing down what he says, usually without much accuracy. "This man follows me everywhere with nothing but his goatskin parchment and writes incessantly," Yeshua explains to Pilate. "But once I

caught a glimpse of that parchment and I was horrified. I had not said a word of what was written there. I begged him, 'Please burn this parchment of yours!' But he tore it out of my hands and ran away." Levi is the one who later brings the message to Woland that Yeshua would like to give the Master "peace."

### **Natasha**

Natasha is Margarita's maid who witnesses Margarita's transformation into a witch after she rubs special cream over her body. Natasha then rubs the cream on herself and turns into a witch as well.

### **Pontius Pilate**

Pontius Pilate is presented as a tormented figure in this novel. He is in Jerusalem during the Passover holiday and is forced to pass a death sentence on a man who he thinks is a tramp and a fool, but not dangerous. After the crucifixion, Pilate assigns soldiers to guard the man who betrayed Jesus, fearing religious followers might try to take revenge on him. However, in this novel, there is no evidence that Yeshua actually has followers. Later, Pilate reveals that he himself had the traitor murdered. Throughout the story there is evidence that Pilate has become fascinated with Jesus from his brief encounter with him, and at the end of the book, Pilate is united with Yeshua.

### **Ivan Nikolayich Ponyryov**

Ivan Nikolayich Ponyryov is a young, twenty-three-year-old poet, who writes under the pen name Bezdomny, which means "homeless" in Russian. This character is present in the first chapter of the novel and the last, as well as appearing intermittently throughout the story. When the novel begins, Ivan is meeting with Berlioz, a magazine editor, at Patriarch's Ponds. They are discussing the historical accuracy of Jesus when Woland, who is the devil, interrupts their conversation and tells them the story of the crucifixion as he witnessed it. He goes on to foretell the bizarre circumstances of Berlioz's death. When Berlioz dies in this exact same way a few minutes later, Ivan chases Woland and his accomplices across town, bursting through apartments and diving into the river. When he ends up at the headquarters of the writers' organization in his underwear, Ivan is arrested and sent to the mental ward. At the asylum, the Master is in a neighboring room; he is able to visit Ivan at night because he has stolen a set of keys that open the doors on their floor of the hospital. The Master explains that Ivan actually did encounter the devil, and he goes on to recount his own life story to the poet. Before he is released from the clinic, Ivan decides to stop writing poetry. By the end of the story, years after the events that make up the bulk of the book, Ivan has become an historian, but continues to be plagued by strange visions every time the moon is full.

### **Grigory Danilovich Rimsky**

The treasurer of the theater, Grigory Danilovich Rimsky, is visited by the ghost of Varenuška the night of Woland's performance, but manages to escape to the train station.

### **Professor Woland**

Woland is frequently referred to in the book as a foreigner. He is mischievous and cunning, but also noble and generous. The contradictions in his personality show in his looks: "his left eye was completely mad, his right eye black, expressionless and dead." He claims to have been present when Pontius Pilate sentenced Jesus and he can foretell the future, but people rationalize his supernatural powers as illusions or else they, like Ivan and the Master, end up in the psychiatric ward. Woland and his associates wreak havoc in Moscow. They put on a show of black magic at the Variety Theater, at which gorgeous new clothes are given to all of the ladies and money falls from the ceiling: soon after, the women are found to be walking the streets in their underwear and the money that looked authentic proves to be meaningless paper. At the devil's ball, Woland drops his disguise as a visiting professor and reveals his true identity as the devil. On the day after the ball he and his associates ride off to the netherworld on thundering black stallions.

## Themes

### Absurdity

The actions taken by the devil, Woland, and his associates in Moscow seem to be carried out for no reason. From the beginning, when Woland predicts the unlikely circumstances of Berlioz's beheading, to the end, when Behemoth stages a shoot-out with the entire police force, there seems to be no motivation other than sheer mischief. After a while, though, their trickery reveals a pattern of preying upon the greedy, who think they can reap benefits they have not earned. For example, when a bribe is given to the chairman of the tenants' association, Bosoi, Woland tells Korovyov to "fix it so that he doesn't come here again." Bosoi is then arrested, which punishes him for exploiting his position. Similarly, the audience that attends Woland's black magic show is delighted by a shower of money only to find out the next day that they are holding blank paper, while the women who thought they were receiving fine new clothes later find themselves in the streets in their underwear. These deceptions appear mean-spirited and pointless, but the victims in each case are blinded by their interest in material goods.

### Guilt and Innocence

The story of Pontius Pilate serves to raise fundamental questions about guilt. As the Procurator of Judea, the representative of the Roman government in Israel, Pilate is responsible for passing judgment on people the Israelis have arrested and brought before him. In Yeshua's case, he feels guilty having to sentence Yeshua to death. Pilate's conscience is awakened during his interview with Yeshua; he shows a fascination with the idea of acceptance, but because of his position he is not able to completely believe in it nor is he able to forget about the idea of evil. The subsequent feelings of guilt over having sent an innocent man to death are compounded when it is reported that, at his death, Yeshua blamed no one for what happened to him, and "that he regarded cowardice as one of the worst human sins." To lighten his guilt, Pilate orders the death of Judas, the man who turned Yeshua over to the authorities. However, Pilate is left eternally discontent; "there is no peace for him by moonlight and ... his duty is a hard one."

### Good and Evil

The traditional understanding of the devil is that he is the embodiment of evil, and that any benefits one might expect from an association with him are illusory. In *The Master and Margarita*, the devil is portrayed slightly different. In the story he does take advantage of the people with whom he comes into contact, offering them money and goods that later disappear; however, he does not send any souls to hell. In fact, Bulgakov's depiction of the devil has him catering to a request made by Yeshua: he leaves the world with the souls of the Master and Margarita and in the afterlife the two souls are given a cottage in which they are united forever. Far more evil than the devil in this book is the literary establishment, which ruins the Master, indulges in gluttonous behavior, and aligns with the controlling Soviet government. By comparison, the actions of Woland and his associates can be looked at positively as they may actually lead people to better themselves. However, most of the victims of Satan attribute their experiences to hypnotism, putting the responsibility for their woes on the devil, not on themselves.

In the case of Jesus, the novel portrays him as an obscure figure, a pawn in a political struggle. Whereas Jesus of the Bible is a celebrated prophet, with a dozen disciples and crowds of thousands who would come to hear him speak and welcome him, Yeshua has one follower, Levi Matvei, who is so mentally unstable that Yeshua himself is uneasy around him. Rather than a gospel of love, Yeshua's message is the more psychological observation that "there are no evil people on earth."

### Artists and Society

Both of the true artists in this book, the Master and Ivan, end up in the mental institution under Dr. Stravinsky's care, while less talented people feast on opulent meals and listen to dance bands at Griboyedov House. The damage caused by false artists goes beyond greed and laziness: when the Master produces his novel the established writers mock him and his book before the public has a chance to see it. This negative reaction does not harm the Master financially—he is independently wealthy from having won the lottery—but it crushes his artistic sensibilities and drives him to



madness. As a result, he burns his work and wanders aimlessly in the cold. He is then admitted to the asylum. Even in his insanity, though, the Master knows himself: he realizes that he has lost his identity and that he probably could not survive outside if he escaped the asylum. He suffered so greatly for having created a work of true art that in the end, when Woland restores his burned manuscript, he is hesitant to take it: "I have no more dreams and my inspiration is dead," he says, adding that he hates the novel because "I have been through too much for it."

As for Ivan, the Master, during their initial meeting, tells the writer he should write no more poetry, a request Ivan agrees to honor. Later, as the Master leaves, he calls Ivan "my protégé." By the end of the story, Ivan becomes a historian, which is the position that the Master held before his novel about Pontius Pilate dramatically changed his life.

## Style

### Structure

This book uses a complex version of the story -in-story structure, weaving the narrative about Pontius Pilate in through the text of the story that takes place during the twentieth century in Moscow. The chapters about Pilate are continuous, following the same four-day sequence of events, and they are coherent, with the same tone of seriousness in the voice throughout the Pilate story. In one sense, their cohesion shows Bulgakov breaking the rules of narrative, because these chapters spring from the minds of different characters. Chapter two is presented as a story told by Woland to Berlioz and Ivan, chapter sixteen is supposed to be Margarita's dream, and chapters twenty-five and twenty-six are allegedly from the Master's novel. Bulgakov tells the events in all of these with one voice because doing so strengthens readers' senses of how much these characters are alike in their thinking.

### Mennipean Satire

Critics have noted that this book follows the tradition of Mennipean Satire, named after Menni-pus, the philosopher and Cynic who lived in Greece in the third century BC. Cynics were a school of Greek thinkers, founded by Diogenes of Sinope, who felt that civilization was artificial and unnatural, and who therefore mocked behaviors that were considered socially "proper." Diogenes is best remembered for carrying a lantern through Athens in broad daylight looking for an "honest man," but he also is said to have pantomimed sexual acts in the streets, urinated in public, and barked at people (the word "cynic" is believed to come from the Greek word meaning "dog-like"). Cynics are remembered for being distrustful of human nature and motives: even today, people use the word "cynical" to describe someone who expects the worst of people.

The satires of Mennipus, written in a combination of prose and verse, made fun of pretensions and intellectual charades. The elite were also ridiculed in Mennipus' plays, as they are in *The Master and Margarita*. The Roman scholar Marcus Tarentius Varro, living in the first century BC, took up this style when he wrote his *Saturarum Mennipearum Libri CL* (150 Books of Mennipean Satires, c. 81-67 BC). The form has continued through the centuries, distinguished from other satires by the wide range of society it derides and the harshness with which it mocks. From the eighteenth century, Alexander Pope's ruthless *Dunciad* is considered a Mennipean Satire, as is Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, from 1932. In the 1960s and 1970s, around the time that *The Master and Margarita* was published, the form proved useful for Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to express his outrage with the Soviet system.

### Symbolism

The symbolic aspects of this novel serve to both render a clear vision of the action while also linking the spirit of the different plot lines together. Of these, the most notable are the sun and the moon, which are mentioned constantly throughout, giving the sense that they are the true observers of the action. The first page of the novel, with Berlioz and Ivan at Patriarch's Ponds, begins "at the sunset hour," and goes on to introduce the devil as the sun recedes. Pontius Pilate's headache is worsened by the blaring sun, as is, the following day, Yeshua's suffering on the cross. In contrast, the Master and Ivan are both tormented by moonlight, which plays with their sanity.

Traditionally, sunlight is associated with logic and rationality, while the light of the moon is often related to the subconscious. Another major symbol is the mention of thunderstorms, which appear in the most significant places in the book. The storm that gathers while Yeshua is on the cross and breaks upon his death is notable for its ferocity, as is the storm that washes over Moscow at the end, while Woland and his associates settle their business and leave. Writers often use a thunderstorm to symbolize the release of one character's pent-up emotions. In *The Master and Margarita*, the storms can be seen as the crying out of whole cultures, ancient and modern, as they become aware of how diseased their social systems are.

The book has numerous other events and objects that can be seen as symbolic because they refer one's thoughts to broader philosophical issues than those at hand. Foreign currency, for instance, can be equated with non-Soviet ideas, with value that the government tries to suppress; the blood-red wine that Pilate spills does not wash away, like the sins on his soul; and the empty suit that carries on business, as well as the Theatrical Commission staff that finds itself unable to stop singing "The Song of the Vulga Boatmen," all represent the mindlessness of the bureaucratic system. These are just a few of the elements that add meaning to the story if read as being symbolic as well as actual.

## Historical Context

### The Stalin Era

Bulgakov's writing career, particularly the twelve-year period between 1928 and 1940 when he worked on *The Master and Margarita*, was marked by Russia's transition from the monarchic empire ruled by Nicholas II, who was overthrown in the Russian Revolution in 1917, and the totalitarian Communist government that ruled the country throughout most of the twentieth century. The first post-revolutionary head of the country, Vladimir Lenin, had the practical concern of protecting the country from enemies and establishing the Soviet power base. He guided the country through the 1918 to 1921 civil war and kept the economy mixed, partially nationalized and partially privatized.

In 1922, two years before Lenin's death, Joseph Stalin rose to be the secretary general of the Communist Party, and he used this position to gain control of the Soviet Union when Lenin died. Stalin felt that the country was far behind the world's more industrialized nations—at least a hundred years behind, in fact. He put forward programs, all part of what he called his "Five Year Plan," intended to increase production quickly. One place he pushed for change was agriculture. There were about twenty-five million farms in the Soviet Union in the mid-1920s, but few produced enough food to feed anyone but the families who lived on them. Successful farmers who made a profit were called "kulaks." Stalin proposed state-run agricultural collectives, which would produce enough to feed the whole country. The kulaks resisted. In 1929, he called for the "liquidation" of the kulaks, and in fighting to keep their farms they destroyed crops, livestock, and farming tools. Nearly one-third of Russia's cattle and half of the horses were destroyed between 1929 and 1933. Successful farmers were taken away to prisons. Soldiers were sent out across the land, arresting farmers who owned private land. In 1928, only 1.7 percent of Soviet peasants lived on collective farms, but that number grew rapidly with the military action: 4.1 percent of the peasants were on collective farms in October of 1929, a number that jumped to 21 percent just four months later and then 58 percent three months after that. By the end of the decade, 99 percent of the Soviet Union's cultivated land was collective farms, while millions of kulaks who had been taken from their farms labored in prison camps.

Stalin's Five Year Plan also reorganized Soviet industry. The government organization "Gosplan," with half a million employees, had the task of planning productivity goals for all industries and checking with factories to see if they were meeting their goals, all with the intent of raising Russia's annual growth rate by 50 percent. Factory managers and workers who were seen as holding back progress, even for safety or economic reasons, were arrested and sent off to labor camps. Fearing punishment, many workers stayed at their jobs twelve and fourteen hours a day, while other factories, with no hope of reaching their assigned production levels, took the chance of falsifying paperwork. From 1928 to 1937 Russian steel production rose from 4 to 17.7 million tons; electricity output rose 700 percent; tractor production rose 40,000 percent. The country's national income rose from 24.4 billion rubles to 96.3 billion. The price, of course, was freedom, and readers of Bulgakov can see the dangers of being in a closed, controlling society with limited resources.

## The Brezhnev Years

Tension between the Soviet Union and the United States was at its greatest between the mid-1940s and the mid-1960s. At the time, these were the world's two leading "superpower" nations, and they competed against each other for technological superiority in the race to put humans on the moon and military superiority in the buildup of nuclear arms. In 1964, Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader most identified with the Cold War, was forced from power in a coup d'etat, and was replaced by the duo of Leonid Brezhnev as the Communist Party leader and Aleksei Kosygin as Soviet Premier. The early part of their rule, from 1964 to 1970, was a period of reformation and stabilization. Brezhnev had risen up through the ranks of the Communist Party and was not interested in changing the social system, just in making the system function more smoothly within the structure set by the Soviet governing body, the Politburo.

The year 1967, when *The Master and Margarita* was finally published, was a time of youth rebellion in the United States, but the same spirit of rebelliousness pervaded in other countries across the world as well. One of the most notable instances of riots against the government came in Czechoslovakia, where, during the "Prague Spring" of 1968, protesters almost shut down the country's Communist government. Because Czechoslovakia was an ally of the Soviet Union, Brezhnev sent Soviet troops across the border, into Czechoslovakia, to defeat the protesters and to keep control of the country for the Communists. It was a turning point in Soviet history, showing the world that the Soviet Union would go to great lengths to defend Communism.

The fact that Bulgakov's book was finally published after nearly thirty years should not be taken as an indicator that the government was relaxing its policies toward artistic works judged to be critical of the political system. Writers were regularly arrested for spreading "anti-Soviet propaganda" if their work showed any flaws in the system, and convicted writers were sent to work in forced labor camps or to languish in mental asylums for "paranoid schizophrenia." Only a writer who managed to sneak his works out of the country and reach an international audience could avoid a harsh punishment from the government, which had its reputation within the international community to protect. This happened to Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1970 and was expelled from the country in 1974.

## Critical Overview

Bulgakov was reviewed with respect during his lifetime, although it was not until the world saw *The Master and Margarita*, published almost thirty years after his death, that he came to be generally recognized as one of the great talents of the twentieth century. During his lifetime, his literary reputation stood mostly on the quality of the plays that he wrote for the Moscow theater, and, because of the totalitarian nature of Soviet politics, critics were at least as concerned with the plays' political content as their artistic merit. In the years after his death, Bulgakov's reputation grew slowly.

Writing about Bulgakov's novel *The White Guard* in 1935's *Soviet Russian Literature*, Gleb Strave was unimpressed, noting, "As a literary work it is not of any great outstanding significance. It is a typical realistic novel written in simple language, without any stylistic or compositional refinements." Strave went on in his review to express a preference for Bulgakov's short stories, which were unrealistic and fanciful. In 1968, when *The Master and Margarita* was released in the West, Strave was still an active critic of Soviet literature. His review of the book in *The Russia Review* predicted the attention that it would soon obtain, but Strave did not think that it was worth that attention, mainly because of the story line with Margarita and the Master, which he felt "somehow does not come off." True to his prediction, though, critics welcomed the novel with glowing praise when it was published. Writing in *The Nation*, Donald Fanger predicted that "Bulgakov's brilliant and moving extravaganza ... may well be one of the major novels of the Russian Twentieth Century." He placed Bulgakov in the company of such literary giants as Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov, William Burroughs, and Norman Mailer.

Many critics have focused their attention on the meaning of *The Master and Margarita*. D. G. B. Piper examined the book in a 1971 article for the *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, giving a thorough explanation of the ways that death and murder wind through the story, tying it together, illuminating the differences between "the here-and-now and the ever-after." In 1972 Pierre S. Hart interpreted the book in *Modern Fiction Studies* as a commentary on the creative process: "Placed in the context of the obvious satire on life in the early Soviet state," he wrote, "it gains added

significance as a definition of the artist's situation in that system." While other writers saw the book as centering around the moral dilemma of Pilate or the enduring love of the Master and Margarita, Hart placed all of the book's events in relation to Soviet Russia's treatment of artists. Edythe C. Haber, in *The Russia Review*, had yet another perspective on it in 1975, comparing the devil of Goethe's *Faust* with the devil as he is portrayed by Bulgakov.

That same year, Vladimir Lakshin, writing for *Twentieth-Century Russian Literary Criticism*, expressed awe for Bulgakov's ability to render scenes with vivid details, explaining that this skill on the author's part was the thing that made it possible for the book to combine so many contrasting elements. "The fact that the author freely blends the un-blendable—history and feuilleton, lyricism and myth, everyday life and fantasy—makes it difficult to define his book's genre," Lakshin wrote, going on to explain that, somehow, it all works together. In the years since the Soviet Union was dismantled, the potency of *The Master and Margarita's* glimpse into life in a totalitarian state has diminished somewhat, but the book's mythic overtones are as strong as ever, making it a piece of literature that is every bit as important, if not more, than it was when it was new.

### Critical Essay #1

*McIntosh-Byrd is a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania. In the following essay she looks at Mikhail Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita as a commentary on the nature and politics of writing.*

Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* is a novel about novels—an argument for the ability of literature to transcend both time and oppression, and for the heroic nature of the writer's struggle to create that literature. The story's hero, the Master, is an iconographic representation of such writers. Despite rejection, mockery and self-censorship, he creates a fictional world so powerful that it has the ability to invade and restructure the reality of those that surround him. Indeed, it has a life beyond authorial control. Despite his attempts to burn it, the story of Pontius Pilate refuses to die. As Woland remarks, "Manuscripts don't burn." This transcendence of message over physical form—the eternal power of narrative over the mundane reality of flammable paper—is in itself an idea that "escapes" from Bulgakov's novel, becoming a commentary on his contemporary Soviet society and the role of authors like Bulgakov within it.

Readers first meet the Master in Dr. Stravinsky's mental hospital, as he says when asked about his identity, "I am a master ... I no longer have a name. I have renounced it, as I have renounced life itself." His identity subsumed into his role as Great Author, the Master's symbolic status is sign-posted from his first appearance. Both the details of his creative process as well as the story he has created will be presented throughout Bulgakov's novel as powerful, almost occult forces, that are greater than material reality, just as the infernal visitors are greater than the rationalist society upon which they wreak havoc. The multiple narrative strands of the novel—the Master and Margarita's story of creation, the story-within-a-story of the master's novel, the dry world of state controlled literature exemplified by MASSOLIT (a literary club in Moscow), and the rule-less world of the satanic gang—perform both individually and in their entirety as a commentary on the nature and power of narrative.

As the hero explains to his fellow inmate, it was the creation of his novel that caused his transcendence to the status of Master—the act of writing forcing a kind of personal transformation upon him. He and his lover, Margarita, were completely consumed in one other and in his work-in-progress—the two consummations fed into and from one another. The novel enabled their romance at the same time as their romance enabled the novel—it is Margarita who oversees its creation and bestows the name "Master" upon its author, and it is she who keeps faith in it when the publishing world rejects it. When the Master burns his manuscript, throwing it in the wood stove, he is attempting to reverse the alchemical process of creation. The unclean text must be transformed into ashes in the "purifying" flames, just as he was transformed into An Author by the purifying act of creating it.

In his story we can see a metaphorized version of the struggles of all authors, the master's story presenting a sort of extended meditation on the nature of being an author. The completion of the novel is the culmination of everything he was working toward and the expression of his personality, an "alternative self" in which his dreams reside. His rejection of writing thus becomes a rejection of his own mind, an act that is literalized by his self-committal to the asylum: he has literally "lost his mind." When Woland returns the manuscript to him, the Master rejects it, saying, "I hate that novel." Woland's reply encapsulates the crippling effects of such self-censorship. As he asks, "How

will you be able to write now? Where are your dreams, your inspiration?" The Master replies, "I have no more dreams and my inspiration is dead ... I'm finished." Of course, by the end of the novel, the Master has re-embraced his story, completing the final line as he flies off to his eternal cottage with Margarita. This pattern of creative struggle, rejection, self-doubt and transcendence represents a simultaneous exploration and rejection of glorification through pain. It is creation, not rejection, that turns a simple author into a Master. In just the same way, the Master's version of the crucifixion stresses joy over suffering. It is forgiveness that allows Pontius Pilate to ascend to Heaven, not a proscribed period of torment; just as Margarita's compassion frees Frieda the infanticide from the eternal cycle of suffering. Both the literal Purgatory of Catholic theology and the metaphoric purgatory of authorial trial are rejected in favor of Grace and acceptance.

This rejection of suffering-as-purity acts as a nuanced critique of literary life in Soviet culture. The writers of "acceptable" literature—the members of MASSOLIT—are forgettable idiots not worthy of serious critique. The authorial voice, represented by the all-powerful satanic gang, dismisses them with a capricious amusement exemplified by the fate of Berlioz, who simply has his head cut off to shut him up. Similarly, the proprietors of the Variety Theater are subjected to various Byzantine tortures befitting their production of terrible art. In this way, *The Master and Margarita* presents not so much an indictment of Socialist Realism as a disgusted mockery of it. Instead, the more serious and sensitive exploration is reserved for "real" authors, those who are outside state approval and whose work is marginalized and banned. Again, the Master is used to exemplify such authors. Subjected first to dismissal and then to active persecution, he gradually embraces the logic of MASSOLIT and burns his own book. As Woland says, "They have almost broken him," and they have done so by causing him to break himself. When this is taken into account, the rejection of suffering as a creative aesthetic must be read as a powerful call to an artistic community under siege rather than to the forces besieging it. The story of the Master's suffering acts as a parable which warns of the dangers inherent in heroiz-ing struggle.

To Bulgakov and his contemporaries, heroiz-ing struggle was an attractive option, very difficult to resist. Soviet writers of the Stalinist period were subjected to extreme levels of censorship, and faced with a choice between living in fear, writing what they were told to write, or never attempting to get published. In *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov creates an artistic world that acknowledges these conditions, and negotiates a different intellectual and philosophical approach to them. The danger of accepting that struggle purifies is presented by the fate of the Master. Struggling does not purify him—rather it represents an acceptance of the forces ranged against him; a voluntary erasure of self that serves the purposes of the state. When he embraces the power of his narrative, he embraces a form of resistance, which says that joy, creation and the telling of stories must be an end in themselves, since—like the Master's novel—they may well be truly finished only after the death of the author. As Bulgakov bitterly said of his own work:

*I have heard again and again suspiciously unctuous voices assuring me, 'No matter, after your death everything will be published.'*

The most difficult task facing The Master, Bulgakov, and Soviet writers in general is to accept that fact while refusing to consign themselves to purgatory.

The power of narrative to create belief, and the concurrent power of belief to restructure reality, is a major thematic aspect of the novel. This works in a multi-layered way, with many versions of narrative playing against each other and providing commentaries on one another. In the most obvious, structural instance, the novel-within-a-novel motif allows Bulgakov to comment on the role of literature in the life of the society and author that produces it. A common genre in Russian literary history, the book within a book appears in such works as Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* and Zamyatin's *We*. Bulgakov's innovation is the relationship between the two books. Though the story of Pontius Pilate is indeed a story within a story, and though it is indeed the Master's novel, discrete boundaries between the two texts are constantly blurred until it is no longer clear which story is taking place within which. Only once is an excerpt from the Master's novel presented as an excerpt—when Margarita sits down to read the charred fragment. The rest of the time, Pilate's story comes from the minds and mouths of others—from Woland at Patriarch's Ponds and the dreams of Homeless at the asylum. It becomes just as real as the story that seems to contain it, a parallel reality that reaches into contemporary Moscow and reshapes it according to its needs. Everything in the Moscow reality revolves around the Yershalayim reality that the Master's book set in motion, culminating in a scene in which it becomes apparent that the Master now exists, like Bulgakov's frame narrative, to resolve the painful reality of Pontius Pilate's story. What started as an author's attempt to achieve—to transform his life by the creation of literature—has been entirely reversed. The author exists in the service of literature, and not the other way round.

The role of literature within the culture that produces it is similarly configured: it literally has the power to change the past, present, and future. The interaction of the Yershalaim and the Moscow realities complicates the relationship of cause and effect through the manipulation of chronology, and in doing so suggests that art transcends time. Chapter twenty-six of *The Master and Margarita* marks the end of the Master's story of Pilate, but in chapter thirty-two Pilate himself reappears, this time within the Moscow narrative. Woland tells the Master:

We have read your novel, and we can only say that unfortunately it is not finished. I would like to show you your hero. He has been sitting here for nearly two thousand years ... He is saying that there is no peace for him ... He claims he had more to say to [Ha-Notsri] on that distant fourteenth day of Nisan.

The meeting of the master and his hero Pilate in the 'eternal now' of the afterlife completes the link between past and present. The two concurrent story lines finally intersect physically, after they have touched upon each other throughout the novel. The Master frees Pilate from his eternal torment, and is himself granted peace by one of his own creations—his version of Levi Matvei who arrives as Yeshua's messenger to Woland. Narrative, this would seem to suggest, is so powerful that it is not only incapable of destruction, but also the very means by which reality is constructed. In this way, Pilate is paradoxically "created," millennia before his creator, the Master, was even born.

When the Master wrote about Pilate, he effectively changed the past, and his characters gained the ability to walk into his present and change his life and the life of his society. In an extended chronological and narrative game, Bulgakov suggests that it is what we read that makes us believe, and what we believe that makes us who we are. Woland and his followers wreak havoc on Moscow by dropping millions of rubles into the audience of the Variety Theater, rubles that turn into foreign bills, soda bottles, and insects, infesting the economy with a supply of worthless money. As Bulgakov makes clear, money—no less than fiction and religion—is dependent on faith, on the willingness to believe that objects of material culture are greater than the sum of their parts. When that belief is lost, reality becomes a set of meaningless, valueless artifacts of no use to anyone. In the final analysis, *The Master and Margarita* represents an absolute rejection of "reality" as it is understood by Soviet materialist culture. Instead, the novel says, fiction is reality and reality is fiction. Everything is dependent on stories.

**Source:** Tabitha McIntosh-Byrd, in an essay for *Novels for Students*, Gale, 2000.

## Critical Essay #2

*In the following essay, Wright presents an overview of The Master and Margarita.*

*The Master and Margarita* was essentially completed in 1940 but its origin goes back to 1928, when Bulgakov wrote a satirical tale about the devil visiting Moscow. Like his literary hero, Gogol (as well as the Master in his own novel), Bulgakov destroyed this manuscript in 1930 but returned to the idea in 1934, adding his heroine, Margarita, based on the figure of his third wife, Elena Sergeevna Shilovskaia. The novel went through a number of different versions until, aware that he had only a short time to live, he put other works aside in order to complete it, dictating the final changes on his deathbed after he had become blind. It remained unpublished until 1965-66, when it appeared in a censored version in the literary journal *Moskva*, immediately creating a sensation. It has since been published in its entirety, although the restored passages, while numerous, add comparatively little to the overall impact of the novel. It has been translated into many other languages. (In English, the Glenny translation is the more complete, while the Ginsburg translation is taken from the original *Moskva* version.)

The novel's form is unusual, with the hero, the Master, appearing only towards the end of the first part, and Margarita not until Part Two. It combines three different if carefully related stories: the arrival of the devil (Woland) and his companions in contemporary Moscow, where they create havoc; Margarita's attempt, with Woland's assistance, to be reunited with her love after his imprisonment and confinement in a psychiatric hospital; and an imaginative account of the passion of Christ (given the Hebrew name of Yeshua-Ha-Nozri) from his interrogation by Pontius Pilate to his crucifixion. Differing considerably from the gospels, the latter consists of four chapters which may be regarded as a novel within a novel: written by the Master, related by Woland, and dreamed of by a young poet (Ivan Bezdomnyi, or 'Homeless') on the basis of 'true' events. Correspondingly,

the action takes place on three different levels, each with a distinct narrative voice: that of Ancient Jerusalem, of Moscow of the 1930s (during the same four days in Holy Week), and of the 'fantastic' realm beyond time. The book is usually considered to be closest in genre to Menippean satire.

Despite its complexity, the novel is highly entertaining, very funny in places, and with the mystery appeal of a detective story. In the former Soviet Union, as well as in the countries of Eastern Europe, it was appreciated first of all for its satire on the absurdities of everyday life: involving Communist ideology, the bureaucracy, the police, consumer goods, the housing crisis, various forms of illegal activities and, above all, the literary and artistic community. At the same time it is obviously a very serious work, by the end of which one feels a need for more detailed interpretation: what, in short, is it all about? The problem is compounded by the fact that it is full of pure fantasy and traditional symbols (features associated with devil-lore, for example), so that the reader is uncertain what is important to elucidate the meaning. Leitmotifs (such as sun and moon, light and darkness, and many others) connect the three levels, implying the ultimate unity of all existence.

Soviet critics tended to dwell initially on the relatively innocuous theme of justice: enforced by Woland during his sojourn in Moscow, while Margarita tempers this with mercy in her plea to release a sinner from torment. Human greed, cowardice, and the redemptive power of love are other readily distinguishable themes. More fundamental ones are summed up in three key statements: 'Jesus existed' (the importance of a spiritual understanding of life, as opposed to practical considerations in a materialistic world that denied Christ's very existence); 'Manuscripts don't burn' (a belief in the enduring nature of art); and 'Everything will turn out right. That's what the world is built on': an extraordinary metaphysical optimism for a writer whose life was characterized by recurring disappointment. There is indeed a strong element of wish-fulfilment in the book, where characters are punished or rewarded according to what they are seen to have deserved.

Thus the novel's heroes, the Master and Margarita, are ultimately rescued, through the agency of Woland, in the world beyond time. They are, however, granted 'peace' rather than 'light', from which they are specifically excluded: a puzzle to many critics. Here, on a deeper philosophical level, there is an undoubted influence of gnosticism with its contrasting polarities of good and evil—which, as I have argued elsewhere, are reconciled in eternity, where 'peace' represents a higher state than the corresponding polarities of light and darkness. Another influence is the Faust story, with Margarita (a far more dynamic figure than either the Master or Goethe's Gretchen) partly taking over Faust's traditional role, in that she is the one to make the pact with Woland, rejoicing in her role as witch. A major scene is 'Satan's Great Ball', a fictional representation of the *Walpurgisnacht* or Black Mass.

Bulgakov, however, reinterprets his sources—*Faust*, traditional demonology, the Bible, and many others—in his own way, creating an original and entertaining story which is not exhausted by interpretation. His devil is helpful to those who deserve it and is shown as necessary to God's purposes, to which he is not opposed. Bulgakov's Christ figure, a lonely 'philosopher', has only one disciple (Matthu Levi) although eventually Pontius Pilate, 'released' by Margarita from his torments after 2,000 years, is allowed to follow him as well.

Woland too has his disciples: Azazello, Koroviev, and a huge, comical tomcat called Behemoth. So has the Master, with Ivan Bezdomnyi. Like Faust, the Master is the creative artist, 'rivalling' God with the devil's help; like Yeshua he is profoundly aware of the spiritual plane, but is afraid, cowed by life's circumstances.

Endlessly fascinating, the novel indeed deserves to be considered one of the major works of 20th-century world literature.

**Source:** A. Colin Wright, "*The Master and Margarita*," in *Reference Guide to World Literature*, second edition, edited by Lesley Henderson, St. James Press, 1995.

### Critical Essay #3

*In the following excerpt, Fanger praises The Master and Margarita as one of the major novels of the twentieth century, comparing Bulgakov to a number of other authors.*

Bulgakov's brilliant and moving extravaganza [*The Master and Margarita*] may well be one of the

major novels of the Russian 20th century.... For the Western reader, the novelty of Bulgakov's genre can only be relative after Joyce and Beckett, Nabokov, Burroughs and Mailer; yet the novelty of his achievement is absolute—comparable perhaps most readily to that of Fellini's recent work in the cinema....

[This] is a city novel, the enormous cast of characters (largely literary and theatrical types) being united by consternation at the invasion of Moscow by the devil—who poses as a professor of black magic named Woland—and his three assistants, one of whom is a giant talking cat, a tireless prankster and expert pistol shot....

On its satirical level, the book treats the traditional Russian theme of vulgarity by laughing at it until the laughter itself becomes fatiguing, ambivalent and grotesque. But there is more: thematically, the novel is put together like a set of Chinese boxes. A third of the way through, in a mental hospital, the hack poet Ivan Bezdomny meets the Master, whose mysterious presence adds a new dimension to the narrative—the dimension in which art, love and religion have their being. Ivan has been taken, protesting, to the hospital; the Master, significantly, has voluntarily committed himself, rejecting the world. He is a middle-aged historian turned novelist who, after winning 100,000 rubles in the state lottery, devotes himself, an egoless Zhivago, to the twin miracles of love and art. Aided by the beautiful Margarita, whom he has met by chance in the street, he writes a novel about Pontius Pilate—which she declares to be her life—only to become the object of vicious critical attack in the press and, in a fit of depression, burns the precious manuscript....

What, then, becomes of the manuscript? The answer is the key to Bulgakov's work. Echoes of Gogol, Goethe, Dostoevsky, Hoffmann and a dozen others are not hard to find, but they are internal allusions; to account for the form of the book—and its formal significance within Soviet literature— one must mention Pirandello, and the Gide of *The Counterfeiters*. Bulgakov's characters, in the common Russian phrase, are out of different operas. The story of the disruption of Moscow by Woland and company is *opéra bouffe*; the story of the Master and Margarita is lyrical opera. But there is a third and epical opera, richly staged and in a style that contrasts sharply with the styles of the other two. The setting is Jerusalem, the main subject Pontius Pilate, the main action the crucifixion of Christ.

This narrative is threaded through the whole of the book, in a series of special chapters....

By merging [the question of what happened to the Master's novel] with Woland's account and Ivan's dream, Bulgakov seems to be suggesting that truth subsists, timeless and intact, available to men with sufficient intuition and freedom from conventional perception. The artist's uniqueness in particular lies in his ability to accept miracle—and this ability leads him, paradoxically, to a truth devoid of miracle, a purely human truth. I am simplifying what I take to be implicit, though complex and unclear, in Bulgakov's book, but there is a clue, easily overlooked, that would seem to support this interpretation. When the Master first appears to tell Ivan his story, Margarita is waiting impatiently for the promised final words about the fifth Procurator of Judea, reading out in a loud singsong random sentences that pleased her and saying that the novel was her life. Now, Bulgakov's own novel ends precisely with the phrase about the cruel Procurator of Judea, fifth in that office, the knight Pontius Pilate. Is the novel we read then, to be identified with the Master's?

The answer is clearly (but not simply) yes. The perspectives turn out to be reversible. Bulgakov's novel had appeared to include a piece at least of the Master's; now at the end it appears that the Master's novel has enlarged to include Bulgakov's. The baffling correspondences, in any event, make the case for mystery, and the heart of mystery is transfiguration—*quod erat demonstrandum*. Margarita's faith in the Master's art is thus justified in ways which she could not have anticipated—and becomes a symbol of Bulgakov's similar faith in his own work. The Master's novel is Margarita's life in one sense as Bulgakov's novel is in another....

[*The Master and Margarita*] is a plea for spiritual life without dogmatic theology, for individual integrity based on an awareness of the irreducible mystery of human life. It bespeaks sympathy for the inevitably lonely and misunderstood artist; it opposes to Philistinism not good citizenship but renunciation.

**Source:** Donald Fanger, "Rehabilitated Experimentalist," in *Nation*, January 22, 1968, pp. 117-18.



## Media Adaptations

*The Master and Margarita* was adapted for video in 1988. This version was directed by Alexandra Petrovich and released by SBS.

The video *Incident in Judea*, directed by Paul Bryers and released by SBS in 1992, is based on material from Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*.

A Polish version, *Mistrz i Malgorzata (The Master and Margarita)*—with English subtitles—of *The Master and Margarita* was released on four video cassettes by Contal International in 1990. This version was directed and written by Maciej Wojtyszko.

*The Master and Margarita* was adapted for audio cassette by IU Liubimov, and released by Theater Works in 1991.

An audio compact disc called *Master and Margarita: Eight Scenes from the Ballet* was released by Russian Discs in 1995.

## Topics for Further Study

Explain why you think that Woland's associate Behemoth is presented as a cat, while Pilate's closest companion is his dog. List the characteristics of these animals that make them fit the roles that Bulgakov has given them here.

Study the treatment of writers in the Soviet Union in the 1930s through the 1960s. Report on the standards to which writers were held by the government, and the punishments that were given to those who disobeyed.

Read *Faust*, by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, which is openly acknowledged as one of the inspirations for *The Master and Margarita*. Compare Goethe's version of the devil with Bulgakov's Woland. Which do you think is more dangerous? Which is written to be the more sympathetic figure? Why do you think Bulgakov made the changes to the devil that he made?

Study the specific political role played by the Procurator of Judea. How did this position come into existence? What would have been the extent of his powers and responsibilities?

## Compare & Contrast

**1968:** Viewing the Vietnam War on television, Americans became more and more suspicious of their government. Atrocities, such as the massacre of hundreds of Vietnamese men, women, and children in the village of My Lai, made Americans feel as distanced from their government as the citizens of Moscow in *The Master and Margarita*.

**Today:** Americans are still suspicious of the government's honesty and competence, so that any military initiative is met with distrust.

**1968:** The newly appointed secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, Alexander Dubcek, refused to attend conferences in Warsaw and Moscow. In order to keep control of the satellite Communist countries, the Soviet Union sent 200,000 troops into Czechoslovakia.

**Today:** Czechoslovakia no longer exists. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, it divided into two republics: The Czech Republic, with a capital city of Prague, and Slovakia, whose capital is Bratislava.

**1968:** Race riots swept many of the country's major metropolitan areas after Martin Luther King Jr. was shot dead in Memphis. A total of 21,270 arrests were made across the country. Forty-six people died in the riots.

**Today:** Many social scientists consider the continued divisions between the races to be America's greatest social failure.

## What Do I Read Next?

This book's use of fantasy elements to lampoon social behavior is reminiscent of Lewis Carroll's ever-popular Alice books, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1872). Bulgakov refers to these books, in fact, in the beginning of chapter eight, when Ivan finds a cylinder in the mental ward labeled "Drink," similar to the mysterious bottle labeled "Drink Me" that Alice finds at the start of her adventure in Wonderland.

Many of Bulgakov's ideas, especially his conception of Woland, the devil, are taken directly from German poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's two-part poem *Faust* (published in 1808 and 1832), which he wrote over a of fifty years.

Salman Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses* created a sensation when it was released in 1988, causing an Iranian religious leader to offer a reward for the "blaspheming" author's death. Rushdie himself acknowledged the similarities between his book and *The Master and Margarita*, noting that "the echoes are there, and not unconsciously." Like Bulgakov's novel, it is the retelling of an ancient religious story within a contemporary story.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is a Russian novelist of a generation after Bulgakov's, who grew up within the repression of Lenin's reformed government. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1970 and was expelled from Russia in 1974 for denouncing the official government system. Critics consider some of his early fictional works about the Soviet government to be his most powerful, including *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962) and *The First Circle* (1968).

Critics have pointed out that the modern trend of "magical realism" in fiction has much in common with *The Master and Margarita*. This style has been most evident in Latin America since the 1960s, in the works of such writers as Alejo Carpenter, Carlos Fuentes, and Mario Vargas Llosa. The most preeminent novel in this genre is *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, by Gabriel García Márquez, who won the 1982 Nobel Prize for Literature.

## For Further Study

J. A. E. Curtis, *Manuscripts Don't Burn: Mikhail Bulgakov, a Life in Letters and Diaries*, Overlook Press, 1992. A noted Bulgakov scholar presents the history of Bulgakov's life in the author's own words, filling in gaps where appropriate but for the most part presenting long-lost personal papers.

Arnold McMillian, "The Devil of a Similarity: *The Satanic Verses* and *Master i Margarita*," in *Bulgakov: The Novelist-Playwright*, edited by Leslie Milne, Harwood Academic Publishers, 1995, pp. 232-41.

Compares *The Satanic Verses* to *Master and Margarita*, Joel C. Relihan, *Ancient Mennipean Satire*, Johns Hopkins,

University Press, 1993. Nadine Natov, *Mikhail Bulgakov*, Twayne Publishers, 1985. Discusses the history of Mennipean satire.

Examines the life of Mikhail Bulgakov. Kalpana Sahni, *A Mind in Ferment: Mikhail Bulgakov's*

Ellendea Proffer, *Bulgakov*, Ardis Press, 1984. *Prose*, Humanities Press, Inc., 1986.

A comprehensive study of Bulgakov, his life, and his works available Analyzes Bulgakov's writing, including *The Master and Margarita*.

## Sources

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Edythe C. Haber, "The Mythic Structure of Bulgakov's 'The Master'," in *The Russia Review*, October, 1975, pp. 382-409.

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Vladimir Lakshin, "Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*," in *Twentieth-Century Russian Literary Criticism*, Yale University Press, 1975, pp. 247-83.

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