



**The Master and Margarita**  
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The Master and Margarita

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This study will examine Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, focusing on the the novel's portrayal of Soviet life in the period from 1929 to 1939 (that is, how citizens were expected to act, think, and express themselves). The study will discuss Bulgakov's critique of this culture, and will discuss the author's alternative to this repressive culture insofar as it is implied in the novel.

Bulgakov is interested in one specific aspect of the relation of the repressive governmental structure to the individual, and that aspect has to do with artistic creation. As the translator writes in the introduction, Bulgakov has a "lasting concern with the relation of the artist, the creative individual, to state authority, and with the fate of the artist's work" (Bulgakov xi-xii). This concern was due in part to the repressive nature of the Stalinist era in general, but was also specifically due to the censorship which Bulgakov's own work---including this novel---suffered in the period in question. Bulgakov was an artist, not a politician, so his description and criticism of the Soviet state and its oppression under Stalin is masked in this novel in myth, metaphor and mystification. At the same time, his book is primarily satirical, which gives a sense of playfulness to issues and themes which are deadly serious.

The Soviet people are expected to act, think, and express themselves in no way which will threaten the authority of the state. In the novel, the artist is represented by the Master, who has written a book about Christ and Pontius Pilate. The story is about the censorship of the book, as well as the role the devil plays in upsetting the machinery of repression. From the very first page, we see the symbolic and satirical nature of Bulgakov's critique of the state's repression of creativity. The literary world in Moscow is organized under the auspices of such associations as MASSOLIT, a group which honors not creativity or individuality but the ability to conform, to churn out material which supports the status quo. The first writer we meet writes under the name "Homeless" (Bulgakov 3). An argument ensues between Homeless and the editor of a state-approved literary journal over the writer's too lively depiction of Jesus as an actual historical figure. One of the most frightening aspects of Stalinist repression was that the government at any time for any reason (or lack of reason) could crack down on an individual artist for expressing what was perceived as anti-state and/or anti-communist sentiment. Bulgakov most often critiques this repression with humor, as when the editor tells "Homeless" that he must not make Jesus so believable as a character---even though that believability is based on negative traits that would cause a Christian to draw back in shock. The unpredictability and illogical nature of such repression is part of what Bulgakov is addressing. The argument between the writer and editor is important because it foreshadows the Master's preoccupation with Jesus, Pilate and the devil, but also because it sets the stage for the novel's basic conflict between the repressive state machinery and the creativity of the artist.

Bulgakov does not have a political agenda, aside from his own personal desire to be free to write whatever he wants about whatever he wants. The author may or may not be Christian, but he clearly wants the freedom to write material which is Christian, anti-Christian, or non-Christian, according to the writer's vision from moment to moment. The state, however, first represented by the editor, sees such lack of ideology as a dangerous threat to the state. The state and its party are the saviors of mankind, so clearly there can be no suggestion that Jesus is the Savior, or even that he existed. To the state and its repressive forces, all creative and artistic efforts must serve the state or the communist party.

Then the devil enters the picture as another threat to the state. Perhaps the devil is mocking the communists' Five-Year-Plans for developing the nation when he says

But in order to govern, it is . . . necessary to have a definite plan for at least a fairly decent period of time.

. . . . How can man govern if he cannot plan for even so ridiculously short a span as a thousand years or so, if, in fact, he cannot guarantee even his own next day? (Bulgakov 11).

The basis of communism and the Soviet state under Stalin in the 1930s was the belief that man is the ruling force in the world, that there is no God, and that whatever order or justice which occurs in the world will occur through the intervention of man as represented on a large scale in the Soviet state. The devil mocks this communist belief, saying that man is lost in the world, does not know what is going on today, and has little or no control over what will happen tomorrow. In fact, the devil himself---in the guise of a "professor"---declares, "And Keep in mind that Jesus existed" (Bulgakov 16).

The basic critique of the Soviet communist state set forth by Bulgakov through his novel is that it places man at the center of the universe. The Master and Bulgakov---the devil as well---know that the world is too mysterious and dynamic for man to ever begin to control it as much as he might like. When man places himself at the center of the universe, he becomes paranoid and arrogant---as did Stalin---and begins to act according to all his basest impulses, as if those impulses were divine. After all, the communist revolution was going to replace tsarist injustices with a heaven on earth. Instead, the horrors of Stalinist repression took place.

In the chapter introducing Jesus (Yeshua) and Pilate, the same conflict ensues between man and God---who will rule? Pilate more than Stalin knew whom he was trying to dethrone, but the result is the same, although Pilate shifts the blame to others for the "death of God." In each case, the repressive culture is challenged by a stranger---whether it is the devil or Jesus---and in each case the pressure of the state comes down hard on the threat, be it internal or external. The artist, the devil, and Jesus are all characters who do not behave themselves, do not think and act according to the imperatives of the state. "Ivan Homeless" is the name of a man who has no home in a culture where he is not free to express himself creatively, because that creativity and expression puts in the public mind images and ideas which run counter to the images and ideas which are approved by the state. The culture is controlled by the militia, by psychiatric clinics, by intimidation, by any means necessary.

The guest, or the Master, is the creator of the novel-within-the-novel which serves as the symbolic centerpiece of the book by Bulgakov. It is clear that, as satirical as he is, Bulgakov has nothing but hatred and contempt for the bureaucracy and the machinery of terror which oppress the people in the state. The creative characters and dynamic human beings in the novel represent Bulgakov and his own suffering under Stalinism, and while he would clearly destroy it in a second if he could, it is a more difficult thing to say what he would replace it with. The novel certainly offers no romantic Eden to replace the Stalinist state. What Bulgakov does offer is a culture in which, apparently, good and evil do battle out in the open, a battle which is carried out on many levels---material, artistic, spiritual. Even this is not so simple, however, for the devil himself is capable of being a tool for good, at least insofar as he exposes greed, restores the Master's book, brings Christ and Pilate together, and liberates the Master.

Bulgakov is not foolish enough to think that he could create a culture and/or a state which would not contain all the flaws which any other culture and/or state has contained. All the author asks for is a society which allows for the working out of the creative process in art, in politics, in social affairs, and, especially, in the realm of the spirit.

Again, it is important to keep in mind that the book is a satire of the Stalinist state. It depicts all that is false and frightened and corrupt in that state, and it does so with as much humor as wisdom. At the heart of creativity is a playfulness which is entirely missing in the authorities of the state, in the editor, the militia, the psychiatrists. They are all too busy seeing themselves as representatives of the state-as-God to notice that the emperor has no clothes. In the Bulgakov culture, humor will certainly be as much a part of the proceedings as spirituality: "We do not know what other fantastical events took place in Moscow that night and, of course, we shall not try to search them out--- especially since the time has come to go on to the second part of this truthful narrative. Follow me, reader!" (Bulgakov 232).

The good-naturedness of Bulgakov's satire perhaps played a part in the fact that he was merely censored rather than killed by Stalin. As much as Bulgakov rejected Stalinism, he did so in a most entertaining way, populating his novel with characters full of surprises and paradoxes. He simply trusted the natural and spiritual processes of life more than did Stalin and his communist enforcers.

The alternative to the Stalinist state, then, in Bulgakov's novel, is a world in which spiritual truth triumphs over political and ideological arrogance and brutality, a world in which man's place is under God, not as God. Stalinism is portrayed as an effort to crush the spirit of man by eliminating the spiritual dimension. Bulgakov seeks to restore both the spirit and the spiritual dimension to human beings and their social, political and creative affairs.

### **Works Cited**

Bulgakov, Mikhail. *The Master and the Margarita*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1987.