



The Master and Margarita Alexa Parkes

Parkes describes how, through the use of the fantastic in his novel, 'Master and Margarita', Bulgakov seeks to ridicule and undermine the foundations of Soviet certainties

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The Master and Margarita

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The 'certainties' of the Soviet Union were indisputable, indubitable even and formed a basis for society. Religion was outlawed as an old fashioned, irrelevant practice. With the advent of enforced atheism came the official decree to reject notions of the afterlife, and any spiritual tendencies or needs. It was considered irrational. Following on from this came many constrictive measures, designed to enforce the new, modern ideas. As a result of this, literature, a means to express man's true nature and desires, suffered greatly, as did the other arts. Through the use of the fantastic in his novel, 'Master and Margarita', Bulgakov seeks to ridicule and undermine the foundations of Soviet certainties.

Throughout the novel, Bulgakov bends the parameters of space, time and imagination, for the Moscow residents, and the reader. Passports, papers, people and money all come and go at Woland's will. Parties that last for hours take only minutes. Guns have no effect and people start to fly. Despite the fact that Soviet Citizens are generally used to mysterious disappearances, and unexplained circumstances, such as those that often lead to arrest, during the Devil's stay in Moscow, they are understandably bewildered. The rumours cannot be put down until the Devil and his retinue have left.

Some of the best examples of undermining through ridicule are the fantastical escapades of Behemoth and Koroviev, two of the Devil's retinue. Bulgakov uses them to great effect in 'The Final Adventure of Behemoth and Koroviev'. After running rings around the plain-clothes squad who come to arrest them in 302A, the pair wreak havoc around Moscow.

They reveal the absurdities of the Turgsin Store, a foreign currency only establishment, by stealing food, and demolishing displays. When the manager arrives Koroviev gives an impassioned, rousing, 'politically dangerous,' speech, comparing, poor, thirst and hunger wracked Behemoth to a fat foreigner, 'bloated with Russian salmon.' Koroviev's speech results in 'a miracle', the only time the word is used in the book. Another customer is so incensed that he attacks the foreigner, screaming, "He's right!" Their antics here are clearly highly politically daring, and the customer is extremely brave to challenge the status quo by agreeing with them.

Having undermined the validity of the Turgsin Store, the pair set it alight and move on to another institution detested by Bulgakov, The Writers' Club. Here Bulgakov uses them to launch a satirical attack on the literary institution that is Massolit. Before entering the writers club Behemoth and 'his inseparable companion Koroviev' pause to consider the institution. They compare it to a hothouse full of pineapples, and Koroviev remarks on how thrilling it is to think that the author of the next 'Faust', or 'Dead Souls' might be inside at the very moment. He continues in a more sinister vein, 'but- but, I say, and I repeat- but! provided that those hot house growths are not attacked by some micro-organism, provided they're not nipped in the bud, provided they don't rot! And it can happen with pineapples you know! Ah, yes it can happen!"

This imagery is very suitable. Firstly it suggests that the writing produced in Griboyedev house is forced, therefore tasteless and unnatural, and secondly that any piece of work similarly controversial or challenging as the classics Koroviev mentions, would not be allowed to flourish now. The writers are good only as gaudy pieces of fruit, mostly for show. Using an exotic fruit like the pineapple might also be linked to the privileges accorded to the writers; after all they have sold their souls in order eat delicacies like smoked sturgeon, and ice cream, whilst the rest of the country is starved of food and literature.

The pair continue their satirical antics with the door lady of the Gribodoyev House. She asks for proof of their status, meaning a membership card, and Behemoth replies,

"But look here- if you wanted to make sure that Dostoyevsky was a writer, would you really ask him for his membership card? Why, you only have to take any five pages of one of his novels and you won't need a membership card to convince you that the man's a writer... I don't suppose he ever had a membership card anyway!"

The woman tells Behemoth that he is not Dostoyevsky, to which he retorts, how do you know? The woman tells him that Dostoyevsky is dead, whereupon Koroviev exclaims that Dostoyevsky is immortal! Bulgakov's objective here seems to be to highlight the ridiculous nature of Soviet bureaucracy. Despite your talent as a writer, without a membership card to the right organisation, you are nothing. Yet even if you have no literary talent but are willing to subscribe to the required Soviet view, you can get a card confirming your status as a writer, and enjoy the benefits which belonging to that organization brings.

Ultimately, Griboyedev house is razed to the ground. There are other examples in the text of Bulgakov wreaking fantastical revenge on the institutions that suppressed him. Consider Margarita, naked, flying on a broomstick to Woland's ball, stopping off at Dramlit house, and screaming "Latunsky! He's the one that... ruined the master!" She proceeds to ransack the critic's flat, destroying everything in her path. Just to be sure that the reader realises that Margarita is not insanely demolishing things indiscriminately, Bulgakov shows her compassionately comforting a child, scared by the chaos surrounding him. People who disagree with critics are not wild beasts after all.

After Woland's incredible ball, the Master and Margarita are reunited with each other and with the manuscript of the novel that the Master had previously burned. "Manuscripts don't burn," says Woland, a now famous phrase. Although in the novel, it may indeed seem fantastical for a manuscript that has been destroyed to reappear, as a metaphor, it reveals Bulgakov's defiance in the face of Soviet censorship and his faith in literature to survive the tyranny of the Soviet regime, however long it may take. Literature cannot be controlled or obliterated. It seems that, like Yeshua, Bulgakov disputes the fact that "There never has been, nor yet shall be, a greater and more perfect government..." In fact, Bulgakov's novel did outlive its author and the regime that banned it, making Bulgakov immortal; a double blow to the State.

One of the most fantastical incidents in the book occurs when Woland and his retinue perform at the variety theatre, in 'Black Magic Revealed'. Woland himself is merely an observer; Koroviev and Behemoth perform all the tricks. Through the duration of the show we see clothes, shoes, perfume and money appearing from thin air, and the beheading and reheading of Bengalsky the politically correct compere. The Muscovites react greedily to the proliferation of luxury goods. The respected Chairman of the Moscow Theatres Acoustics Commission has a mistress, it is revealed. In fact, the true nature of the audience is disclosed not the secrets of black magic. In general, the Muscovites are observed to be, "People like any others... over fond of money, but then they always were they remind me very much of their predecessors, except that the housing shortage has soured them ..." Through Woland's appraisal of the Muscovites Bulgakov undermines certainty of the success of the entire Revolution. Despite the sociological theories that abounded at the time, the Muscovites remain unchanged. It is impossible to override nature.

The first and foremost 'certainty' dealt with is, of course, the undisputed correctness of atheism. In the very first chapter, Bezdomny and Berlioz, a poet and his editor, are at Patriarch's Ponds talking about a poem Bezdomny has been commissioned to write about Jesus. Unfortunately, Bezdomny has misunderstood his brief, and graphically described a real, living Jesus, 'albeit one with every possible fault.' What was required was a poem that proved that Jesus never existed at all, was nothing but myth. This in itself seems faintly ridiculous. How can a poet with 'a great talent for graphic description' be ordered

to create an interesting poem in which the main character does not exist? Bulgakov is indicating that literature and religious beliefs are being abused; as an introduction to the main themes of this novel, this exchange is extremely enlightening.

However, the most significant incident at Patriarch's Ponds is the conversation between the poet, his editor, and Woland, the mysterious foreigner. The reader can but laugh at the righteously materialistic Berlioz as he declares himself an atheist, and denies the existence of both God and his counterpart, the Devil, in front of the latter's own face. Berlioz continues to argue, keeping well in line with the approved Marxist views of the State at the time,

'But this is the question that disturbs me- if there is no God, then who, one wonders, rules the life of man and keeps the world in order?'

'Man rules himself,' said Bezdomny angrily in answer to such an obviously absurd question."

This is ridiculous for two reasons; the first is that the lives of Soviet citizens were increasingly controlled by the State, and the second is the unpredictable nature of life, which threatens man's existence every day. So, the Devil puts it to Berlioz that a man may unexpectedly be hit by a tram at any time.

'You're not going to tell me that he arranged to do that himself? Wouldn't it be nearer the truth to say that someone quite different was directing his fate?'

Of course, Berlioz refutes this argument, but to no avail, as he himself is shortly decapitated by a tram, thereby disproving his own argument. Materialistic Berlioz' idealistic companion, Bezdomny has a contrary experience. One of the few who truly understand what Woland is, he is wrongly admitted to the madhouse, where he becomes the Master's pupil, renounces his former poetry and actually gains an insightfulness that was always to be denied to the politically correct, narrow minded Berlioz.

However the humiliation of the State's literary lackeys is further expounded on later in the novel. Woland further ridicules Berlioz at his ball. Amid a throng of already dead guests Woland tells Berlioz' decapitated, yet living head, 'you have always been a fervent proponent of the theory that when a man's head is cut off his life stops, he turns to dust and ceases to exist. I am glad to tell you, in front of all my guests- despite the fact that their presence here is proof to the contrary- that your theory is intelligent and sound.... So be it! You shall depart into the void, and from the goblet into which your skull is about to be transformed I shall have the pleasure of drinking to life eternal!'

Such a speech is full of irony and surreal paradoxes; Bulgakov has used Berlioz to great effect to explore the 'dialectics of closure', as Susan Amert expresses it, and ultimately to undermine the Soviet materialist view.

Throughout the novel Bulgakov's use of implausible and incredible happenings effectively undermine the 'certainties' of the materialist world. Massolit is destroyed, bureaucracy is ridiculed, xenophobic attitudes are parodied and institutions and theories are mocked relentlessly, even in the epilogue. Here the Soviet machine is even able to rationalise the supernatural; this rationale creates such absurdities as people arresting cats, and furthermore, giving glowing references for their release! Bulgakov's use of the fantastical as a device to satirize and thereby undermine accepted 'certainties' of his time is genuinely masterful.