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Michaela Magdalena Juklova from the University of California, San Diego, explores how the female characters in *The Master and Margarita* are indispensable to the novel's plot as enablers of men, and their actions reveal a great deal about gender relationships in the Soviet Union in the early twentieth century.

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# **Margarita Uncovered: Sexuality, Power, and Gender in Mikhail Bulgakov's Master and Margarita**

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In Mikhail Bulgakov's novel *Master and Margarita*, most of the female characters are portrayed as hysterical, gluttonous, and shallow. In their midst, Margarita appears as the shining antithesis to their behavior, with her tenacious, driven mentality and undying loyalty to the Master. The women characters are indispensable to the novel's plot as enablers of men, and their actions reveal a great deal about gender relationships in the Soviet Union in the early twentieth century. The struggles of the novel's central female character, Margarita, underline the difficulties women faced in attaining spiritual, sexual, and social fulfillment in a society devoid of any kind of spiritual life, equality, or truthfulness.

Compared to ordinary women in Bulgakov's Moscow, Margarita has it all - materially, at least. Bulgakov writes that "the childless thirty-year-old Margarita was the wife of a very prominent specialist... Her husband was young, handsome, kind, honest, and adored his wife. Margarita was not in need of money... [she] could buy whatever she likes" (217).

However, despite her advantages in life, she is unhappy, unfulfilled, and desperate. Since Margarita's husband fails to meet her needs, she jumps at the opportunity to fulfil her sexual and spiritual desires with the Master. Her gender, however, makes it impossible for her to triumph over the Master in any way. She comes to define herself through him, and only with him can she find happiness in life. Although she may be more dynamic than the Master, as exhibited by her determination to serve Woland, she does not attain the authoritative position occupied by the novel's prominent male characters.

The primary source of Margarita's power and energy is her sexuality. Although Margarita is a coquettish, sex-driven, and powerful woman, she is denied the right to find fulfillment in her own life and therefore depends on men. Her childlessness may be seen as a manifestation of this same dependence. Although it is not clear whether Margarita's childlessness is due to infertility or conscious choice, she compensates for it with a ravenous sexual appetite, and soon takes a lover. Simultaneously, she channels her maternal instincts into a nurturing relationship with the Master, treating his novel as if it were her baby. In doing so, she becomes both a mother and a martyr to the Master, providing constant and unconditional care while repeating: "I'll save you, I'll save you" (Bulgakov 147).

Eric Neiman argues that in some ways all of the Moscow citizens in Bulgakov's novel act like children (Neiman 655). Margarita, however, is a child in a different way. Without children of her own, Margarita demonstrates a child's typical rebelliousness and playfulness.

This is demonstrated by her passionate and devious destruction of Latunsky's apartment after she obtains magical powers (Bulgakov 187). From Margarita's perspective, Latunsky has offended her dear Master and so must pay for it. Because she is unable to deal with criticism in a calm and composed manner, her response is similar to the outburst of a child. Her determination and rebelliousness, combined with her active nature and strong sexual drive, cause the men in the novel to fear her, despite their persistent attraction to her. Thus Margarita's power lies in her sexuality, despite the lack of explicit sex in the novel. Owing to the gender mores of the time, however, Margarita's only option is to remain in a nurturing, motherly position; otherwise she would pose a threat to the highly hierarchal, patriarchal system of power which is strongly promulgated throughout the novel.

Margarita's nurturing relationship with the Master demonstrates features of Sigmund Freud's Oedipus complex, particularly submission and domination (Freud 157). Margarita acts as the motherly herald of truth, and she provides the compassion and love that the Master needs in order to stay alive. Bulgakov writes that Margarita "put on an apron first thing" and would "prepare lunch" (142) when she came daily to visit the Master, assuming the role of a good housewife. She also "foretold fame, urged him on... began to call him a master... and said her life was in this novel" (Bulgakov 143). The name "Master," on one level, signifies him as a good writer and a spiritual being. On another level, the name reflects the Master's dominant role in his relationship with Margarita, as well as his role as a son. Unencumbered by the obstacle of a father figure, Margarita appeals to the Master's masculinity by playing the dual role of mother and lover. This arrangement is favorable to Margarita too, since it fosters her motherly instincts as well as her childlike rebelliousness. The Master, in turn, enjoys being on a pedestal and dominating Margarita, whose "life was empty" before meeting him (Bulgakov 141).

In a manner that highlights the narrator's ambivalence toward female sexual power, as well as power in general, Margarita can only be completely sexual after making contact with the supernatural world. However, even before she decides to strike a deal with Woland, she is described in terms of the supernatural, and even likened to a witch. When Bulgakov first introduces her character, he notes that she has "some enigmatic little fire" in her eyes (171), which can be interpreted as the sexual burning that initially attracted the Master's attention.

Bulgakov also refers to her as a "witch with a slight cast in one eye" (218), which suggests that she already has sympathy for the devil. This may be the reason Woland chooses her to be his queen for the ball.

Margarita uses her sexuality to navigate the patriarchal society in which she lives, manipulating the men in power to obtain what she wants. David Gillespie notes "in Russian literature the threat of female sexuality is effectively neutralised... female sexuality is seen as grotesque and evil" (Lapidus 97). For example, before Margarita meets Azazello, who gives her the ointment to transform herself into a witch, she attracts male attention while sitting on a bench. Bulgakov writes that "some men gave the well-dressed woman a sidelong glance, attracted by her beauty and her solitude" (223). Perhaps mistaking her for some version of a Dostoevskian prostitute, one man tries to solicit her for sex. She drives him away, since any sexual encounter with him would be

meaningless, but afterwards she wonders, "Why, in fact, did I chase that man away? I'm bored, there's nothing bad about this Lovelace" (Bulgakov 175). Even though her magnetic sexual power attracts various men, she knows that a meaningful relationship is only possible with the Master. Thus, by using Margarita and other women as enabling, secondary agents of actions, Bulgakov mitigates any potential threat to male power in the novel. Despite her various abilities and talents, Margarita cannot attain the empowerment she deserves. Staying true to her womanhood would threaten the overarching patriarchal system in place, in which even Woland and Yeshua participate, and it would be nearly impossible for her to achieve anything at all.

The character of Margarita, particularly the way her gender is portrayed, embodies many aspects of Russian culture. Edward E. Ericson argues that her role is multifaceted, and that she simultaneously represents love, the feminine principle, a version of Bulgakov's own wife, the Virgin Mary, the Church, and a faithful disciple (Erikson 112). However, the focus on her purity is deceptive: rather than embodying the Virgin Mary, her character is more like the reformed prostitute, Mary Magdalene. This can be seen as a possible reincarnation of the holy prostitute figure from the works of Dostoevsky, such as Sonya in *Crime and Punishment* and Liza in *Notes from the Underground*. This interpretation provides the novel with a much-needed biblical female character, which is lacking in the chapters about Yeshua. Despite arguing that Margarita is the equivalent of the Virgin Mary, Elizabeth Bejaour implies that the feminine element has been removed from the life of Yeshua sections of the novel, and his entourage re-emerges in full force through Margarita's role in the novel (Bejaour 704). If Margarita is indeed this Mary of Magdala figure, the question remains whether she uses this power to get the Master back, and whether she does have sexual intercourse with Woland.

Bejaour, Ericson, and other critics agree that Margarita - as the bearer of energy, compassion, and love - does not have sex with Woland, since it would cripple her integrity and purity. Although the sensual nakedness of the female guests suggests that an orgy occurs at the ball, some critics maintain that neither Woland nor Margarita participate in any undignified orgy during Satan's ball (Bejaour 702). Rather, Woland seeks Margarita for her blood and her name, since the hostess of the ball must invariably be called Margarita. It appears that Woland does not require Margarita to have sex with him, but he tests her in other ways, which eventually culminates in Woland proclaiming "never ask for anything, never for anything, and especially from those who are stronger than you" (Bulgakov 282). Due to the novel's unreliable narration, however, it remains ambiguous whether Margarita participates in a sexual encounter with Woland, and whether his ball is actually a massive orgy.

In order to analyze another aspect of Margarita's sexuality, she can be compared to the strong, self-sacrificing female character in Hans Christian Andersen's "White Swan." In this story, a sister who has many brothers takes a vow of silence. This symbolizes a pledge of sexual continence with regard to her husband, which is for her brothers' profit. She weaves nettle shirts for her enchanted brothers, and during the night she gathers nettles for the shirts from prickly shrubs that wind around her hands and feet. This can be interpreted as a symbolic loss of virginity to her "composite" brothers (Lapidus 92-93), due to

her self-sacrificing nature. The same logic can be applied to Margarita when she rubs Woland's knee.

Previously, this rubbing of his knee had been the job of Hella, the other naked witch who disappears from the group of characters at the end of the novel. Woland describes Hella as "efficient, quick, and there is no service she cannot render" (Bulgakov 256). From latter part of Woland's suggestive claim, the reader can infer that both Hella and Margarita have sex with him.

Woland's request for Margarita to rub his knee is another part of her test. Woland moans, "My leg hurts, and now this ball," to which Margarita quietly responds "allow me" (Bulgakov 258). The process is physically painful for her, yet she selflessly proceeds; "the liquid, hot as lava, burned her hands, but Margarita, without wincing, and trying to not cause any pain, rubbed it into his knee" (Bulgakov 258). Woland also explains that the pain is a result of an encounter with a "charming witch with whom I was closely acquainted" (Bulgakov 258). Considering Margarita's penchant for subservience and motherly instincts, as well as the obvious phallic symbol of Woland's limb, it becomes less clear whether she actually does have sex with Woland. As Ericson points out, it is expected of witches to "maintain strictest silence about their traffic with the Devil" (127), and this adds another veil of uncertainty. The implication of sexual contact with Woland would further confirm Margarita's role as a figure of Mary Magdalene, as opposed to the Virgin Mary. As a woman in a highly gendered world, the only way for Margarita to gain anything is by allying herself with the powerful and doing whatever they require of her.

Beaujour observes that the Soviet edition of *Master and Margarita* omits the entire passage detailing Woland's dealings with the witch who corrupted his knee, apparently in order not to tarnish Bulgakov's reputation (702). One can argue that this passage would not so much tarnish Bulgakov's reputation as it would strengthen the evidence that there were some alternate sexual motives for Margarita to satisfy. The less sex implied, the greater the possibility of it lurking in the background, especially at Satan's Ball. As Ericson notes, subtlety was crucial to describing sex in this era, since anything considered blasphemous would be toned down or eliminated (126).

The possibility of a sexual encounter between Margarita and Woland is indicated by the imagery of sinister perversion. While undergoing preparations for becoming Woland's queen of the ball, Margarita "realized she was being washed in blood" (Bulgakov 261).

Although some critics, such as Ericson and Beaujour, see this and other encounters with blood in the chapter as some inverted form of the Eucharist, it can also be argued that the scenes allude to the legendarily bloodthirsty Hungarian queen Erzsébet Báthory. The washing of Margarita in virgins' blood reflects a similar ritual enjoyed by Báthory, who was accused of torturing and mutilating girls. Báthory allegedly bathed in virgins' blood to remain young and beautiful. The bathing of Margarita in blood, along with the rubbing of leaves, is performed in order to make Margarita even more sexually attractive for the ball than she is after she becomes a witch. In this case, blood symbolizes earthly vices, rather than spiritual sacrifices.

Although Margarita is the more active figure in her relationship with the Master, she constantly defines herself through him. Without the Master and his novel, Margarita would never become a brave, fearless woman. And although she is more powerful than the other women in the novel, the male characters still force her into subjugation. However, she still manages to use her sexuality to attract men and gain what she wants. In a way, the Master and Woland allow her the opportunity to sidestep traditional gender roles, albeit in a limited way.

Her role is complicated by her disciple-like relationship to the Master, which to a certain degree diminishes her accomplishments. Margarita's plight demonstrates the difficulty of female fulfilment in a totalitarian society, where even the supernatural and magical operate within the same patriarchal system as the Soviet government.

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