

Cowardice and consequences in "master and margarita"



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In Mikhail Bulgakov's novel, *The Master and Margarita*, many types of sin and corruption are exemplified in both Moscow and Yershalaim: people are rude and curt to others for no reason, accept bribes, act and speak hypocritically, spy and betray others, and so on. In Moscow, each person who commits these sins is punished by Woland, the arbiter of retribution. The sheer volume of attention given to the sin of cowardice in particular and its consequences makes it possible to assert that Bulgakov considers cowardice to be the worst vice of all. Cowardice certainly is the worst of the sins that the characters in Bulgakov's novel commit; however, it is only cowardice at the expense of others that Bulgakov judges and punishes the most severely, and committing this sin does not mean that one cannot be granted absolution. Thus, it is difficult to claim it as an "ultimate" sin. Two very important characters are presented in *The Master and Margarita* as antitheses of the cowardice that reigns in both Moscow and Yershalaim: Margarita and Yeshua. When looking at the cowardice of the other characters, it is important to examine Margarita and Yeshua first; they provide the models for good behavior against whom Bulgakov measures the cowardly characters. In the Moscow part of the story, Margarita is an example of complete bravery in the face of extreme odds. If cowardice is tolerance of a system of evil out of fear for one's personal well-being, then Margarita defies this at every turn. Although she is married to a very important man (who is, moreover, kind and honest and handsome), has the entire floor of a house to herself, her own garden, plenty of money, and never has to work, she turns away from it all freely. (Bulgakov 187) She is of royal blood (Bulgakov 215), and this kind of behavior is what gives her that distinction: other people, wanting to keep their status and get more for

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themselves, lie and betray for the desirable things that Margarita willingly gives up. She refuses to conform to the system that says she should be ecstatic with her position in life and instead gives up that position to gain what her heart desires. She shies from nothing in her pursuit of that desire, not even Satan's ball, becoming a witch, baths of blood, or the devil's retinue. She is merciful to Frieda (Bulgakov 241) and devoted to the Master, for whom she offers to (and essentially does) sell her soul. (Bulgakov 190) Her counterpart in bravery in Yershalaim is Yeshua. Perhaps even more so than Margarita, he is the antithesis of cowardice. He lives out his last minutes crucified to a post where he is blistered by the sun, tortured by flies, and in tremendous pain—and most important of all, he has risked this plight out of his own convictions, submitting to the torture of crucifixion willingly. (Bulgakov 150) He refuses to adhere to what society demands of him; even when Pilate gives Yeshua a chance to lie about what he has said about Caesar, Yeshua refuses and admits to what he has done. (Bulgakov 22) Most of all, the power that sustains him throughout all of this is never even postulated as divine. In the chapters in which Yeshua is interrogated and tortured, there are no miracles, no triumphant entries into Yershalaim, no disciples (only one scraggly tax collector), and no mention of the resurrection. Bulgakov brings Yeshua's level of bravery onto a plane where all men and women should be able to reach. He is brave without the benefit of divinity or crowds and defends his unshakeable sense of truth with only his own strength of spirit to bolster him. There are three characters or types of people that can be contrasted with Margarita and Yeshua, both in Moscow and Yershalaim: the critics and members of Massolit, Pilate, and the Master.

The critics, and members of Massolit like Berlioz, are examples of the kind of
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cowardice Bulgakov condemns: for fear of losing their positions and ways of life, and for fear of condemnation, these people believe one thing but spout the other, to the detriment of those around them. Latunsky and the critics who condemn the Master and essentially ruin his life secretly admire what he has written; the editor clearly is impressed with the Master, asking why he has never been heard of and where he comes from, but says the novel cannot be published. (Bulgakov 119) The critics do not say what they want to say—that the Master's novel was good—because they are afraid of the consequences. (Bulgakov 121) Other types, such as Berlioz, say things they do not believe: Berlioz makes arguments that are inexcusably ignorant for a man of his education, but does so because he needs to toe the party line. (Bulgakov 223) It is clear what Bulgakov thinks of these characters' cowardice when he compares their revelries at Gribodeyev to Satan's ball. The celebrations are eerily similar: at midnight the band strikes up and plays loudly and dissonantly, people dance wildly and with abandon, someone shouts "Hallelujah." (Bulgakov 49-50, 224-5) Even the quote, "O gods, my gods, poison, give me poison" is reminiscent of the most cowardly character of all, Pilate. (Bulgakov 50) The people at Satan's ball are criminals and evil-doers, and those members of Massolit at Gribodeyev are compared to them. They have material goods because they have capitulated and decided to live within the confines of a system that demands the sacrifice of conscious and moral truth; they choose to live, because of their fear and cowardice, lives of petty interests, materialism, greed, envy, betrayal, competition, and corruption. Massolit has its parallel in Yershalaim with Pilate, although his cowardice is even more extreme, judging by his punishment. He embodies, perhaps, the most dangerous type of cowardice: one that longs for good but

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betrays it by failing to oppose evil. Just as divinity is absent from Yeshua so that his goodness is more pronounced, so is any influence such as Woland absent from the interrogation and condemnation of Yeshua by Pilate. While Woland does claim he was there, the reader never sees or hears his presence; thus, Pilate's betrayal is the result of his own choices. (Bulgakov 34) The Procurator is left face to face with Yeshua, depriving him of any justification for his actions. Pilate does have sympathy and compassion; he does not want to destroy Yeshua for nothing, and is in fact prepared to save Yeshua and hide him in his home. (Bulgakov 21) However, this sympathy is for nothing. Pilate wants, more than to help Yeshua, to keep his position and to not anger those in power. He fears Caesar's power, making sure to talk loudly about Caesar's greatness and refusing to release Yeshua once he learns that Yeshua has disrespected Caesar. (Bulgakov 22-3) He is intensely afraid of informers and of losing his career and his position in life. (Bulgakov 24) He makes one last feeble attempt to help Yeshua, but yields before Kaifa and, knowing the terrible crime he is committing against his conscience and sense of truth, consents to the execution of Yeshua. (Bulgakov 28) His cowardice forces him to spit in the face of his own knowledge of good and evil, and he becomes nothing more than a tool for evil wills. His terrible sin can be seen in his punishment: even after the traces of the execution are washed away in the storm, Bulgakov extends Pilate's torment of his own conscience to eternity (until he is absolved by the Master); for two thousand years, Pilate has not been able to find eternal rest because of the torture his own mind inflicts on him as a result of his sin. (Bulgakov 323) However, there is a final example of cowardice in Moscow—one that contradicts the notion of cowardice as the greatest sin—and it is the cowardice of the Master. His

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cowardice is of a different kind than that of Massolit and Pilate in that it harms no one but himself. The Master is not a moral weakling who betrays others out of fear of losing his position in life, the things he desires, or having it easy. Instead, the Master is amazed, discouraged, embittered, and ultimately beaten down by the treatment his honest creation has received from editors and critics. (Bulgakov 119-121) According to him, what has happened to him because of his novel has effectively ended his life.

(Bulgakov 118) What he desires because of the fear and cowardice caused by this treatment is not to maintain a position, receive favors or things, or even be comfortable. What he wants is to renounce his role as the voice of truth, retreat, and no longer have a need for "big plans." (Bulgakov 125) He refuses Margarita's offer to have his novel published (Bulgakov 250), is broken and gives up on writing, and says: "I no longer have any dreams, or inspiration either." (Bulgakov 249) Unlike the other characters guilty of cowardice, this fear of the Master's does not come for fear of losing any material goods; it is simply, as Margarita says, that "they have ravaged his soul." (Bulgakov 310). While he is guilty of cowardice, it is not the kind of cowardice Bulgakov condemns. He a passive, broken victim, guilty of betraying and hurting only one person: himself. While cowardice, especially of a certain sort, may be the worst sin, this is not to say that it is without forgiveness, mercy, or absolution. The Master's absolution is easy to explain away: after all, if it is true that the Master's cowardice is of a much lesser degree than Pilate's, he deserves the peace that is given to him. (Bulgakov 305) He receives no punishment for his cowardice, and his absolution is attained. However, Pilate's absolution is more radical. Pilate commits the grossest type of cowardice in either Yershalaim or Moscow: he betrays his <https://assignbuster.com/cowardice-and-consequences-in-master-and-margarita/>

conscience and sense of truth by condemning an admirable man who is undeserving of death, simply because he is afraid of the material consequences if he does not. Despite this betrayal, in the end, Pilate is forgiven for his weakness; his punishment is not everlasting, and he is given what he wants: to walk down the path of moonlight to the light, where absolution and Yeshua wait. (Bulgakov 324) Because of the negation of Pilate's punishment, and the peace given to the Master, it's difficult to say that Bulgakov believed that cowardice was the ultimate sin: after all, ideas about absolute guilt and punishment do not really fit into a world where those who commit the worst sin are spared never-ending punishment. In closing, cowardice is rampant in both Yerushalaim and Moscow: when the choice is presented to either follow the conscience or succumb to the pressures of party and society, most of the characters chose the latter, tolerating evil because they fear losing their positions, lives of relative comfort, and material goods. The constant reinforcement of this cowardice presents the reader with the idea that cowardice is the ultimate sin. The definition of cowardice, however, must be amended, because it is only a certain kind of cowardice that Bulgakov presents as the greatest sin: the kind of betrayal that harms others. In addition, since this type of cowardice can, in the end, be forgiven, it is hard to posit that it is the "ultimate" sin. It is certainly the worst presented in the novel, and the one that most characters in it are guilty of, but those who commit it are still able to receive mercy.