

Master and margarita by mikhail bulgakov: two novels in one

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



“ Master and Margarita” by Mikhail Bulgakov is probably the most famous and the most unusual novel ever created in the USSR. Bulgakov artistically investigated the theme of epic struggle of good and evil relating biblical events to the realities of Moscow in the mid-thirties, having demonstrated that people have not changed in the last two thousand of years except that “ only the housing problem has corrupted them”[1].

The narrative of “ Master and Margarita” is pretty sophisticated, including at least three plot lines: adventures of Woland and his suit in Moscow, story of Master and Margarita themselves, both taking place in Moscow, and a tale of Yeshua Ha-Notri – a mendicant prophet before Pontius Pilate and an obvious allegory of Jesus Christ. This paper aims to investigate ties between modern and biblical events in the “ Master and Margarita” and show how Bulgakov paralleled biblical characters and events with his contemporaries.

Bulgakov’s mission in “ Master and Margarita” was more than complicated because he devoted his novel to such sempiternal topics as love and fear, good and evil, God and Satan. He obviously demonstrated that those topics are timeless, for Master is interested in the same questions as Pilate was 1900 years before. At the end of the novel Moscow and Jerusalem seem to be united in a metaphysical oneness, and two plots turn out to be one. Jerusalem in the case symbolizes immortal ever-being world and Moscow is the world of the earth. At that Woland acts as a figure which ties the worlds, for he “ was on Pontius Pilate's balcony, and in the garden when he talked with Kaifa, and on the platform, only secretly, incognito”[2] and then visited Moscow and talked to Master. It is hard to believe, that Woland is a real

Satan, he rather looks like exactly part of that power which eternally wills evil and eternally works good.

The story opens by a discussion at Patriarch's Ponds and nothing unreal happens at the beginning, except for a strange presentiment of Berlioz. In order to continue his narration, Bulgakov needed to introduce the reader into fantastic multi-world reality. He accepts that the reader is so skeptic about existence of God and Satan, that Woland expects to notice an atheist in every window. In this scene Bulgakov puts the words into the mouths of Woland: "Bear in mind that Jesus did exist"[3]. Woland says this to Berlioz, but it is Bulgakov who says to the reader: bear in mind that Jesus did exist.

After that Bulgakov's story of Jesus is perceived by the reader as actual, and the biblical world is easily connected with earthly world. Moreover, the existence of the divine reality is proved even by its fiercest enemies - Berlioz and Ivanushka. The latter has blamed Jesus so desperately, "his Jesus came out, well, completely alive, the once-existing Jesus, though, true, a Jesus furnished with all negative features"[4]. Berlioz tells Ivanushka that the rhyme has to be rewritten, but it is then rewritten not by Ivanushka but by Woland. So, concludes Bulgakov, whatever we mean about Jesus in this life, divine reality will remain unchanged.

In order to stress the biblical chapters and keep the style unified Bulgakov showed Jerusalem as a vision of Woland or a dream of Ivanushka or a story told by Master or read by Margarita. His tone changes from satiric or sympathetic to unimpassioned speech in the evangelical passages. In contrast, when Bulgakov turns back to Moscow, his characters are no longer

legendary and obtain everyday features. Thusly he achieves to basic aims - inseparably integrates biblical chapters into the novel and creates an illusion of parallel between the two worlds.

Events are separated almost by two thousand years of time, but analogies are easy to trace. Both stories happen in May in the days before Easter, both in the mid-thirties of I and XX century AD. The weather and temporary changes are almost same. And surely the crowd is the same, whether it is a crowd which gathers to stare at Yeshua's execution or a crowd in the vaudeville house.

The tale of both worlds ends with the same conclusive phrase " the cruel fifth procurator of Judea, the equestrian Pontius Pilate"[5], and so Bulgakov shows that the outcome of the novel is justification and recognition of truth. When Pilate, a biblical symbol of a man who yields before evil, shrives, he enters into the moonlight, being " forgiven on the eve of Sunday". While Pilate walks with Yeshua by the moonlight beam Ivanushka stands at the beginning of this beam, symbolizing those whose choice is still not sure.

The most recognizable " double-character" is Yeshua and Master - an analogy of Christ and Bulgakov himself. Yeshua does not act as a Saviour, he is rather a creator who faces incomprehension and repudiation. Same happens to Master, whose novel is welcomed by angry critics and who is finally symbolically executed, because he is unable to create any more and falls into insanity. However, his novel is not lost, and later it is read by Yeshua-Jesus himself, so Master's novel is a story of biblical events and at the same time a link between those events and our world.

In contrast to all other human characters, even Margarita, Master and Yeshua are the only ones who struggle for truth and sincerity to the end. Pilate had a heart with Yeshua and hinted, that only a slight lie could save his life. Yeshua refused and became a martyr. Pilate could not overcome his fear and sentenced himself to everlasting spiritual unrest. Surprisingly, Pilate's vis-à-vis in the modern world is Margarita, who leaves Master in a critical moment and has a feeling of guilt for long years. But at the end she is saved by Woland and Pilate is forgiven by Christ.

Virtually every character in the novel has to face a choice situation and the choice he or she makes in the usual world predetermines his or her future existence in the spiritual reality. Master chooses to forget about his novel and about Margarita and so he becomes Pilate's accomplice in execution of Christ. Therefore, he is not worthy of light and he never meets Jesus. Divine will is passed to him by Woland, who, in turn, receives it from Matthew Levi. Characters of the paralleled novels never meet together and their ties are limited to communication via messengers and joining into one at the end.

As regards the other characters, their choice is rather comic, than dramatic. Berlioz's uncle chooses to live in Moscow, and the only thing he is interested in when he receives a message about death of his nephew is to receive ownership of an apartment. Nikanor Ivanovich, chairman of the tenants' association', chooses to take money from a suspicious foreigner.

The crowd of women chooses to change their dress at a show arranged by Fagot and Behemoth. Their punishments are ridiculous but this does not mean that their actions will not be judged later in Ewigkeit. Fate of Berlioz is

the most frightening warning. Woland appeared to be an adept of a theory “ which holds that it will be given to each according to his faith.”[6] In the earthly life Berlioz has chosen to believe that there is nothing in the afterlife, and Woland has put him into nonentity in the spiritual world.

The final scenes of the novel show the idea, that examples of the great masters are never lost, for “ manuscripts don't burn”[7]. They become a part of eternity, and their creators obtain eternal life. So they are able to cross the border between two worlds. The fate of Bulgakov’s novel is the best illustration for this thesis, for it has been published only decades after his death and immediately gained global recognition. Perhaps this was in a way a fourth plot line of the novel – Bulgakov’s own life became a parallel for lives of Yeshua and Master.

References:

Mikhail Bulgakov. The Master and Margarita. Penguin Books Ltd; New Ed edition, 2004. 432 pages.

[1] Mikhail Bulgakov. The Master and Margarita. Penguin Books Ltd; New Ed edition, 2004. p. 124

[2] Ibid, p. 42

[3] Ibid, p. 18

[4] Ibid, p. 8

[5] Ibid, p. 380

[6] Ibid, p. 275

[7] Ibid, p. 369