

# Rational versus irrational in the master and margarita



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Rational versus Irrational in The Master and Margarita In 2005 the movie adaptation of Bulgakov's The Master and Margarita was released on Russian TV. According to Gallup Media, it was watched by 47.1 % of the total Russian TV audience and became a nation-wide spectacle. Why is The Master and Margarita still so popular? Regardless of its complexity, the novel is very entertaining, funny in places, and has the elements of a detective story. In Eastern Europe many people love Bulgakov's text for his satire of Soviet bureaucracy, Communist ideology and everyday life.

Another aspect that fuels the interest in the novel is that it allows for varied interpretations. The novel consists of three closely related stories. The first story focuses on Woland (a prototype of devil) who visits Moscow of 1930s and together with his companions creates havoc in the city. The second story is about the Master, an artist, and his beloved Margarita who inspires him to write a genius novel about Pontius Pilate. After Soviet censorship rejected the Master's novel, and under the attacks of corrupted critics, he burns his manuscripts and ends up in psychiatric hospital.

Margarita makes a pact with devil and saves him. The third story is the Master's narration of the Crucifixion of Yeshua (a symbol of Christ). It is the novel inside the novel and reaches the reader indirectly through the dialogues and dreams of the characters. Some critics attempted to explain the meaning of The Master and Margarita by exploring the influences of Faust by Goethe, Graph Monte-Cristo by Dumas, Gofman's and others' works. The others based their arguments on the relation of the novel to the New Testament or based on the scrutiny of Bulgakov's biography.

These are attempts to interpret the novel based on rational judgments; however, Bulgakov rejects such methods within the text in *The Master and Margarita* thereby implying that the novel must be interpreted idealistically. The Bulgakov's epigraph to the novel cites Goethe's *Faust*: "... who are you, then? ' ' I am part of that power which eternally wills evil and eternally works good'" (Bulgakov 16). The contradiction of " that power" which is able to do evil but eternally does otherwise implies the rejection of rationalism and invites the reader to perceive the novel idealistically.

At the same time, Bulgakov sets the false track for those critics who are stuck with their obsessive rationalism and, especially, atheism – the most extreme form of rationalism. Berlioz, whom Bulgakov introduces in the first chapter, is a prototype of those critics. Berlioz is having a conversation with the poet Ivan Homeless (his literary pseudonym) about the poem that the latter wrote. Homeless misunderstands Berlioz who commissioned the work portraying Jesus " in very dark colors" while Berlioz wants the poem to show that Jesus never existed.

He proves it to Homeless logically trying to make an impression that he knows the history well. However, Berlioz, as Bulgakov points with sarcasm, only " skillfully pointed to ancient historians" but does not know what their ideas mean. He is not concerned about the truth but uses all means to manipulate Homeless, a prototype of future artists who have a choice: to accept the role of a puppet of official ideology and not to be concerned about the truth or to stay alert and be able to distinguish the genuine ideas from ignorant and distorting propaganda.

When Woland joins their conversation he asks Berlioz's opinion on five proofs of God's existence. Berlioz says: "...in the realm of reason there can be no proof of God's existence" (Bulgakov 21). Woland sarcastically exclaims "Bravo! You have perfectly repeated restless old Immanuel's thought in this regard" (Bulgakov 21). He refers to the philosopher Kant to sarcastically show the ridiculousness of Berlioz's approach which applies the rules of reasoning to the matters of spirit: "...[Kant] roundly demolished all five proofs, and then, as if mocking himself, constructed a sixth of his own" (Bulgakov 21).

This shows how the great philosopher argues against rationalism. Berlioz tried to defend his position and referred to Strauss who "...simply laughed at this proof" while Homeless ignorantly suggests that "[t]hey [the authorities] ought to take this Kant and give him a three-year stretch in Solovki[1] for such proofs!" (Bulgakov 22) But Woland smiles at Homeless' ignorance and mentions his own conversation with Kant: "As you will, Professor, but what you've thought up doesn't hang together.

It's clever, maybe, but mighty unclear. You'll be laughed at" (Bulgakov 22). Berlioz limited by his stubborn rationalism does not believe that such conversation could have existed as all Kant's contemporaries must have been dead. However, ironically, Berlioz is the one who dies right after their conversation is over. Ignorant Homeless exhibits reason when he suggests that Woland is crazy, but he will be hospitalized to psychiatric clinic himself soon.

Woland points at the helplessness of those humans who are unable to break through their limited rationalism and asks: “[I]f there is no God, then, one may ask, who governs human life and, in general, the whole order of things on earth? ” (Bulgakov 22) Homeless answers that humans do. However, Woland rejects that by asking a rhetorical question: “...how man can man govern, if he... cannot even vouch for his own tomorrow? ” (Bulgakov 22) The second chapter narrates Pontius Pilate’s interrogation of Yeshua Ha-  
Nozri.

Bulgakov opposes the Yeshua’s idealistic philosophy to the arrogant rationalism of Berlioz. Bulgakov shows that Yeshua is a victim of those who are unable to interpret his ideas correctly. When Pilate asks Yeshua if he was going to destroy the temple building and called on the people to do so the latter replies:” ...these good people [who witnessed against him] ... haven’t any learning and have confused everything I told them” (Bulgakov 30). Nevertheless, Yeshua calls them “ good people” as well as he calls Pilate in such way who with his entire rational mind can not understand Yeshua’s ideas.

Similarly, people such as Berlioz will never understand Kant’s idealistic reasoning. Bulgakov parallels Pilates laughing after Yeshua called him “ a good man” to the Strauss’ laughing whom Berlioz cited when he makes his argument to Woland about Kant’s sixth prove. Bulgakov’s world view can be characterized by his tendency to seek the truth in the realities of invisible world stressing the importance of abstractions and relationships, which cannot be observed directly. This approach is typical for philosophers of idealism as opposed to the philosophers of materialism (Combs).  
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For instance, when Pilate points to Yeshua that his life is “ hanging by a hair” the latter asks in respond: ““You don’t think it was you who hung it, Hegemon? ’” (Bulgakov 34). This question parallels the one that Woland asks to Berlioz and Homeless about who governs human life. Pilate replies: ““I can cut that hair’” (Bulgakov 34). This answer mirrors the Homeless’ reply that man governs the world. Yeshua, like Woland, proves Pilate wrong by asking: ““You must agree that surely only he who hung it can cut the hair? ” (Bulgakov 34)

This is similar to Woland’s reply to Homeless and evidences Bulgakov’s idealistic reasoning. When some commentators try to explain the meaning of the characters they often use a rational approach similar to the one employed by Pilate or Berlioz in the novel. For instance, “...[one] scholar claims that... Bulgakov’s Ieshua is the biblical Christ, but cunningly presented from an unusual angle in order to slip him past the Soviet censor and re-establish the Christ of the New Testament as a central landmark in Russian literature” (Glenny 238-249).

Such rational reasoning that identifies the characters of Yeshua Ha-Nazri (Jesus Christ in Aramaic language), Pontius Pilate, and Mathew Levi as the masked biblical personages can be disproved if one examines the character of Mathew Levi. Mathew Levi was Yeshua’s companion who recorded his ideas. When Yeshua looks at Levi’s parchment he is horrified because he has said nothing of what has been written there. He exclaims ““Burn your parchment, I beg you! ’” (Bulgakov 30) Levi distorted Yeshua’s ideas in the same way as other people might have distorted the original ideas in The New Testament.

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Therefore, the opinion that Bulgakov intentionally tried to make The New Testament a literary subject should be doubted. To the contrary, other commentators argue that “ Jerusalem” story is meant to strip any notion of divinity from Yeshua’s figure (Glenny 238-249). It is true that Yeshua’s is presented rather as a philosopher than as a divine person. However, his dialogue with Pilate in that part where he argues that procurator is not the one who determines his faith is most likely meant to take away the reader from this direction of interpreting.

The Woland’s arguments in the first chapter serve the same purpose. Such opposite interpretations prove that it is impossible to find precise answers about the meanings that Bulgakov intended to create. Glenny points out that “ The Master and Margarita is grounded in a sound knowledge of Neo-Platonist ideas”. The presumption of Neo-Platonism is that experience is a necessary component of knowledge. Since nobody can have the exact experience that Bulgakov had when he was writing the text nobody can have the knowledge of what exact meaning he implied. Therefore, the novel must be perceived idealistically.

Some critics assert that Bulgakov was a religious person which also explains why he rejected rationalism as the way of thinking. Rationalism is “ any view appealing to reason as a source of knowledge or justification” (Lacey 286). Justification of human action is one of the issues that Bulgakov is concerned of in the novel. In this respect, rationalism takes the following approach to justify human decisions. Humans make decisions according to the circumstances that surround them. This implies that circumstances can serve as justification for human immoral actions.

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According to Vinogradov, ...[t]hrough Pilate, through his fate and his spiritual agony, Bulgakov replied: "...man is something more than a concatenation of circumstances, something more than mere existence" (54-55). Pilate who did not want Yeshua's execution, however, signed the death sentence due to circumstances. For doing that he was punished with eternal spiritual sufferings. Some critics argue that Bulgakov's approach is similar to the approach of modern western philosophers of Existentialism, such as Sartre, with the major difference that Bulgakov did not share the gloomy view of the future (Vinogradov 54-55).

Through Yeshua Bulgakov optimistically says "...man will pass into the kingdom of truth and justice... " (Bulgakov 37). At the end of the novel Pilate is relieved to join Yeshua in that kingdom. Another aspect that evidences Bulgakov's rejection of rationalism and deserves attention is " Bulgakov's believes that good and evil [are] far from being divorced from the nature of human consciousness" (Glenny 238-249). Moreover, Sartre states that "... they are one and the same thing" (Glenny 238-249). For example, Yeshua is a prototype of Christ and represents the forces of good.

However, Bulgakov depicts him as a human. Woland is a prototype of Devil and represents the forces of evil. But Bulgakov parallels Woland and Yeshua who is, unlike the biblical Devil, often merciful to sinful humans. As to confirm the irrational unity of good and evil Woland asks Mathew Levi a rhetorical question: "Think, now: where would your good be if there were not evil, and what would the world look like without shadow? " (Bulgakov 336) In such way Bulgakov persuasively argues against Materialism and Rationalism and defends the ideas of Irrationalism.

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One of the ethical implications of Bulgakov's reassertion of Irrationalism in *The Master and Margarita* is that he defends one of the fundamental ideas of Christianity: people being free to choose between good and evil should choose good. The choice of good must be made even if it happens to be irrational. Pilate made rational choice of evil and was punished to suffer eternally. Margarita made irrational choice of good and managed to save her beloved Master. This decodes the meaning of the epigraph to the novel: consciousness of humans is "...that power which eternally wills evil and eternally works good".