

Abstract

The novel by Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, is a multifaceted piece of writing. The novel encompasses significant characteristics of several genres, including Russian Socialist Realism, a satirical story, and fantastical fiction. It requires a particular clarification that the sociohistorical context in which the book was written posed specific limitations and directives to what kind of values a piece of art should promote in the society. Clearly, in the Soviet Union, religion was not considered one at all. In view of this, the vast amount of biblical references and mythological allusions in the novel present a full field for literary investigation and analysis. This analytical research will explore how the biblical references affect the message of the story and facilitate (or hinder) its greater understanding.

Methodology

In this analytical research, I have implemented the pragmatic approach to study. I find the primary advantages of this approach in its coverage of both quantitative and qualitative research methods since each of them has considerable limitations. In order to establish how the biblical references and mythical allusions affect the perception of the text of *The Master and Margarita*, I have conducted a comparative analysis of the scenes from the novel and the Bible itself. It is of importance that Bulgakov recreated several biblical stories in his writing so that they remained easily recognizable while the details were altered to a great extent. One of these landmark scenes constitutes the culmination of the Pontius Pilate storyline, that is the execution of Yeshua Ha Notzri. In the novel, Yeshua is a prototype of the biblical Jesus Christ, yet deprived of some of his canonical features. It is precisely the differences in the stories that suggest implications to Bulgakov's novel and how the traditional tenets and viewpoints could be reversed.

In order to establish the role and impact of the numerous allusions in the novel, an analysis of the data gathered from the primary and secondary sources was conducted. The book *The Master and Margarita* stands as the primary source, whereas the Bible, articles, and other pieces of literature research make up a set of secondary sources.

Introduction

Russian literature of the 20th century grew from the tendencies of the 19th century, in which a significant place was given to religious motives. But the political events in the new Russia left a mark on the attitude toward religion and the church. Soviet time was characterized, among other things, by the persecution of the church and the preachers, and the country was determined toward anti-religious, atheistic propaganda.¹ However, despite the persistence of the state authorities, they never were able to abolish the centuries-old traditions of ancestors in the minds of the people. Thus, there developed a national tendency in the 20th century, and the Bible's allusions had become vital images of Russian literature of the century.

The novel *The Master and Margarita* became a kind of encyclopedia of human souls, historical events, and biblical subjects. It organically combined events in early Soviet Russia and the ancient Yershalaim, the dramatic story of the Master and his beloved Margarita, and the mystical theatrical performance that was the Ball of Woland. Moreover, the Yershalaim tragedy of Yeshua Ha Notzri and Pontius Pilate became, as it were, the yardstick of human

¹ Belyk, "The Master and Margarita: Deconstructing Social Realism,"

<http://arts.brighton.ac.uk/re/literature/brightonline/issue-number-three/the-master-and-margarita-deconstructing-social-realism>.

qualities. In other words, the author created a measure of spirituality and morality. Bulgakov does not accidentally intertwine the biblical references and a realistic narrative about Moscow's life. In the novel, the author seeks not so much to comprehend and tell people the history of Yeshua as he does to delve into more profound philosophical studies of the human soul. The biblical motifs appear closely intertwined with the text of the novel, which may be considered as two Gospels: the author's Gospel 'from Woland' and the Gospel of the Master 'from Yeshua.'

The action of *The Master and Margarita* unfolds on Holy Week, which precedes Easter and, that is, before the day when, according to the legend, Jesus Christ was resurrected.² The Ball of Woland is a festival of forgiveness for criminals, one of whom, according to the Gospel, first entered paradise with Christ. The gospel story is mirrored in the events of Holy Week, and especially in the symbolism of the Woland Festival. In particular, the ball stands for The Holy Passion, Woland's garment represents Jesus' rags, and the skull of Baron Maigel is a prototype of the skull of Adam. Moscow becomes the center of the new Gospel, the city of renewal and hope. Importantly, Bulgakov is occupied not so much by the biblical events themselves, as by the problems of good and evil and their interrelation. In his reading of the biblical history, Yeshua appears not as God, but as a man. It is no accident that Bulgakov introduces Christ by his Aramaic name.

Bulgakov's novel *The Master and Margarita* presents a unique piece of writing. Researchers still can not determine its genre. Some refer to it as a satirical novel, and others define it as a philosophical novel. Indeed, many philosophical problems in the story bring up

² "The Master And Margarita." Novels for Students.

questions such as what is right and what is evil, what is the nature of a human being, and whether it can be changed.³ The formulation of these problems contributes to the hard work of the reader's mind. One of the main issues in the novel is the problem of the distinction between good and evil, whether it is possible or not to distinguish, and whether it is necessary. Bulgakov shows that good and evil are closely intertwined. For example, Woland was introduced as Satan, but he does not sow destruction and corruption. In fact, he brings creative power as well. It is due to his will the meeting of the lost Master with Margarita becomes possible; then, he restores the burned manuscript. In addition, Woland punishes vices and occasionally restores justice.

Along with the vague image of Woland, other philosophical questions are introduced in the novel. Specifically, they concern the nature of humankind and the ways it can be changed, if any. For that purpose, Woland appears in Moscow in the 1930s to see if people have changed in two millennia. And he comes to the conclusion that there is virtually no change: "They're people like any others. They're over-fond of money, but then they always were... Humankind loves money, no matter if it's made of leather, paper, bronze or gold. They're thoughtless, of course... but then they sometimes feel compassion too... they're ordinary people, in fact, they remind me very much of their predecessors, except that the housing shortage has soured them..."⁴ Hence the conclusion follows that the progress of humanity does not depend on the social structure of society, that people do not become better.

³ "The Master and Margarita." Novels for Students.

<https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/master-and-margarita>.

⁴ Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*,

http://www.masterandmargarita.eu/estore/pdf/eben001_mastermargarita_glenny.pdf.

And precisely because outside interference cannot change the nature of a human, Woland occupies the position of an observer. He neither affirms the kingdom of justice on earth nor pursues a revolution. Woland only conducts “individual educational work” that requires warning people about their future destiny. Then, he studies the reaction. Thus, Berlioz does not take into account, and Ivan Bezdomny changes his life dramatically. Hence, a person is not only free in the choice between good and evil, but is themselves responsible for this choice.

Results

The first and the most apparent reference to the Bible in the novel *The Master and Margarita* is related to the characters of Pontius Pilate and Yeshua Ha Notzri. To be more specific, there are two storylines within the story, where the first one depicts Moscow of the 1930s and takes the bulk of the plot development, and the second one plays out during the so-called beginning of the new era that is, in fact, Jesus Christ’s lifetime. In the novel, Yeshua repeats the path of Jesus Christ, as told in the Bible, who sacrificed his life for the sins of humankind. Though in the novel neither the divine nature nor the divine mission of Yeshua was mentioned, he died for the idea that all people will have dignity and be good. Thus, there is no explicit indication that Yeshua was the Son of God, but the allusion to Jesus Christ is extremely powerful. Yet, in terms of the novel, characters of which state that they had denounced God, it is only natural that some aspects connected to religion are deliberately downplayed. Despite the fact that the second storyline appears more deeply interrelated with the events described in the Bible, there are also biblical metaphors in the first storyline that connect both realms and supply the novel with specific connotations. Thus, it is possible to state that the religious motive is distinct throughout the entire book and is vital for the understanding of the story and sometimes even the conduct of the characters.

It is critical to mention that *The Master and Margarita* was created with an eye on Western civilization and basically shares basic principles of Christianity. From that perspective, this sole fact presupposes the massive amount of references to the Bible. Thus, Moisiu notes that Greco-Roman and Christian culture shaped the ideological content of the novel. As it has been mentioned earlier, the very existence of such characters as Pontius Pilate and Yeshua corresponds to the Bible. However, it is the discrepancies in the novel and the Holy Scripture that create various metaphors. Specifically, the Master had written his book about Pontius Pilate with an intentional deviation from the original Bible story with the sole purpose of transmitting some personal message in the writing. In such a manner, Yeshua is immortal both in the Bible and the Master's novel, though the grounds for it seem different at first. In the Bible, he is the Son of God, whose immortality originated from his divine nature, while in the Master's novel, he became immortal because of the philosophical idea that he had borne.

However, the Bible itself is a doctrine that explains how people were created and how they should live. In other words, the Bible entails a particular philosophy in it, and the canonical Jesus Christ, then, is a bearer of the philosophy as well. Similarly to Yeshua in the Master's novel, he is immortal, as well as the ideas that he was advocating. From that perspective, divine nature is something that comes not from the physiological instincts of the human body, but the force that outlives and overcomes the physiological processes in humans. These discrepancies, in fact, lead to the similar conclusion that people need an idea, a concept, to guide them through their lives with maximum comfort.

In relation to the philosophies that Jesus Christ and Yeshua were carrying in the Bible and the Master's novel respectively, they also appear somewhat similar. Thus, Christ taught

people to love and respect each other,⁵ whereas Yeshua preached that all people are kind and, therefore, the violent acts of humans are only consequences of good people being harmed: “There are no evil people on earth...He [Centurion Mark Muribellum] is, it is true, an unhappy man. Since the good people disfigured him he has become harsh and callous.”⁶ In this respect, it becomes evident that the novel written by the Master rests on the biblical narrative, whereas the details are changed in order to highlight new interpretations of “the powers that give life to existence and the rapports between Good and Evil, God and the devil, and the human nature.”⁷ At large, this concept may be applied to *The Master and Margarita* in general, as the novel questions all of the established standards regarding beliefs, the perception of morality, and the way society assesses actions of individuals.

At this point, it is critical to mention a significant number of dichotomies in the novel apart from those that have been discussed already. These are sanity and madness, reality and magic, past and present, religion and atheism, conscience and duty. In contrast to the Bible, the novel provides neither answers nor instructions on whether something is good or bad, but instead allows the audience to read the solution between the lines while delivering the stories of the characters who had faced dilemmas involving choosing between the two concepts.

As it has been already noted, in *The Master and Margarita* Bulgakov brings up not only biblical questions, but he seeks to highlight philosophical, that is, eternal problems. With

⁵ “Matthew 5 – NIV Bible,” <https://www.biblestudytools.com/matthew/5.html>.

⁶ Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*,

http://www.masterandmargarita.eu/estore/pdf/eben001_mastermargarita_glenny.pdf.

⁷ Qose, “The Figure of Pontius Pilate in the Novel The Master and Margarita by Bulgakov Compared with Pilate in the Bible,” p.56.

the help of the Bible, the author tries to rethink the struggle between good and evil, the crime and subsequent remorse, the execution of the innocent and responsibility for this cruelty, the senselessness of betrayal, and fruitless attempts to atone for it by means of punishment. The story of Yeshua and Pilate embodies the struggle of light and darkness. However, the author notes that light and darkness cannot exist without each other and are always paired together in the world and in people's minds. It is impossible to comprehend the light without an understanding of the darkness. Similarly, in *The Master and Margarita*, a special bond emerges between Pontius Pilate and Yeshua Ha Notzri: "Bulgakov's chapters implicitly explain for us why Pilate's character comes off so well in the Gospel versions. The tale may be summed up as follows: Impressed by Jesus' wisdom at the interrogation, Pilate became a sort of secret advocate of the condemned, even to the point of finally arranging for the murder of the man who'd betrayed him, one Judah of Kerioth, or, as he's more commonly known, Judas Iscariot. This act of retribution, once revealed to Matthew Levi, effects a bond of sorts between Pilate and the future evangelist."⁸

The same battle is also taking place in the life of the Master in contemporary Moscow. Bulgakov does not see a God in Yeshua, but a man whose thoughts and actions can be inherent in any mortal. He, like everyone in this world, experiences universal feelings, ranging from fear to suffering. Bulgakov tries to define the essence of good and evil, but comes to the same conclusion that goodness is the ability to love, and it originates from devotion; in turn, sin is expressed through hatred, cowardice, and betrayal.

⁸ Mader, "The Master and Margarita and the Gospel According to Matthew,"

<http://www.necessaryprose.com/bulgakov.html>.

At this point, it is critical to mention that the Pontius Pilate novel adheres quite strictly to the Gospel accounts. Despite having so much in common with the Gospels, Bulgakov shifts his focus to Pilate. He turns the names of the biblical characters Aramaic again: Jesus becomes Yeshua Ha Notzri, and Jerusalem becomes Yershalaim, giving an impression of authenticity. Importantly, Bulgakov had been known for his in-depth research of the Bible and life of Jesus. He tried to grasp that moment in history when the actual person of Jesus turned into the proclaimed Christ. Therefore, in the novel, Woland was addressed, "...you of all people must realise that absolutely nothing written in the gospels actually happened. If you want to regard the gospels as a proper historical source..."⁹

The Master and Margarita provides insight into the prohibited religious aspect of the Russian social life of the 1930s. In this respect, it is interesting that Bulgakov himself puts criticism of the Gospels in the mouth of Yeshua: "This man follows me everywhere with nothing but his goatskin parchment and writes incessantly. But I once caught a glimpse of that parchment and I was horrified. I had not said a word of what was written there. I begged him—please burn this parchment of yours! But he tore it out of my hands and ran away."¹⁰ A little later, Yeshua also gives a completely different account of his arrival in Yershalaim when compared to the way Matthew Levi described it: no one cheered him, he came alone with Levi and on foot, not on a donkey. This gospel criticism can at the same time justify Bulgakov's 'gospel' of the master, that is the novel about Pontius Pilate. This gospel cannot be read as a credible historical source because it is fictional, and it shifts the view of the audience from Yeshua (the alleged Son of God) to other active participants of the events. In

⁹ Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*,

http://www.masterandmargarita.eu/estore/pdf/eben001_mastermargarita_glenny.pdf

¹⁰ Ibid.

other words, the Master's novel removes actual biblical elements and sets them together in a different way to ensure the ground for new interpretations of what had happened. And Master's gospel is first authorized by Margarita, who treats it as a sanctuary, and finally even by Yeshua, who has read it and found it so great that he wishes to give the Master and Margarita eternal peace together. In this light, *The Master and Margarita* can be read and interpreted in very different ways. It is a true masterpiece, which appeals to people bearing different cultures and remains relevant.

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