



THE GREAT BOOKS FOUNDATION

DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR  
**The Master and  
Margarita**



**Mikhail Bulgakov**

## About This Discussion Guide

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All references to the text are from the Penguin edition of *The Master and Margarita* (2001).



DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR  
*The Master and Margarita*  
by Mikhail Bulgakov

## Introduction

Why would the devil pay a visit to a contemporary city, and what sort of business would he conduct there? What seems a fanciful premise was perhaps less so for a persecuted writer in the Soviet Union under Stalin. Mikhail Bulgakov completed his novel *The Master and Margarita* just before his death in 1940, but it remained officially unpublished until 1966, whereupon it achieved the status of an underground masterpiece. In the book's first chapter, the devil appears briefly to Berlioz, a literary magazine editor, as "a transparent citizen," a "phantasm" (p. 8) that disappears after Berlioz closes and opens his eyes. Then, in the midst of a conversation between Berlioz and Ivan, a poet, about whether Jesus was real or fictitious, the devil appears to both of them and joins their conversation, looking only unusual enough to be thought "a foreigner" (p. 10). He is troubled by their atheism and their corresponding belief that humans determine their own fate. Besides assuring them that Jesus did in fact exist, the devil predicts the precise manner in which Berlioz will die, and he turns out to be right. Slipping on spilled sunflower oil in the third chapter, Berlioz falls onto the rails of an oncoming tramcar, which severs his head. From this beginning, we might assume that Woland (the name Bulgakov eventually gives the devil) will perpetrate evil and, while he is at it, prove the powerlessness of humans to predict or control the future. But the novel's epigraph, from Goethe's *Faust*, has prepared us for something else; it is a question asked by Faust, answered by Mephistopheles: " ' . . . who are you, then?' / 'I am part of that power which eternally / wills evil and eternally works good.' "

Insofar as Woland's evil manifests itself in the sudden, menacing disappearance of various characters, as well as the deaths of Berlioz and Baron Meigel, he inevitably reminds us of how Stalin dealt with actual and potential political enemies. But Woland is also a force for good, as evidenced by his orchestration of the reunion of the novel's other central figures—the master, an unnamed novelist whose manuscript has been publicly denounced and denied publication, and Margarita, his married lover. Moral ambiguity is central to the novel. As Woland says to Matthew Levi, “what would your good do if evil did not exist, and what would the earth look like if shadows disappeared from it?” (p. 360).

The interconnectedness of opposing ideas or concepts, frequently demonstrated by strange reversals, is one of the principles upon which the novel is constructed. Near the middle of the book, the personal secretary for the head of the Commission on Spectacles and Entertainment of the Lighter Type describes an encounter between her boss, Prokhor Petrovich, and Koroviev, one of Woland's retinue. Annoyed by Koroviev's assertiveness, Petrovich quickly loses patience, shouting, “What is all this? Get him out of here, devil take me!” Koroviev is only too happy to oblige: “Devil take you? That, in fact, can be done!” (p. 189) Petrovich is thereafter nothing but a suit, though one which continues to go about Petrovich's business and speak with his voice. This incident is but one example of a running joke in the novel—its characters invoke the devil in a figure of speech, only to have their words make even more literal than figurative sense. Like all deeply funny jokes, this one is in the service of a serious idea. The distinctions we draw between the literal and the figurative—or between good and evil, real and imagined, life and death, art and reality, the material world and the spiritual world—have a certain kind of utility. They bring order to the randomness and chaos of personal experience. But they also limit our sense of what is possible. What Bulgakov's novel suggests is that when order is imposed externally, using extreme measures—such as those employed by Woland to emphasize human powerlessness or by Stalin to maintain political power—the personal

experience of those upon whom order is imposed becomes so detached from reality that the feeling of randomness and chaos is heightened, not reduced.

If Woland, despite his resemblance to Stalin, is too complex to fit inside a simple framework of good and evil, so too are the master and Margarita. It may be tempting to see the master as a representation of the pure artist made to suffer in an environment that can accommodate neither him nor his art. But we are given to understand, though indirectly, that Yeshua (the name given to Jesus in the master's manuscript) considered cowardice among the worst of vices, and we must ask if it is not cowardice that causes the master to try to burn his manuscript. Also, when considering what the master's fate will be, Woland agrees with Matthew Levi's assessment that the master "does not deserve the light, he deserves peace" (p. 361). Is peace a greater or lesser reward than light?

Margarita is even more complicated. Though her husband is "young, handsome, kind, honest, and adore[s] his wife" (p. 217), only the master makes her happy. It's never entirely clear whether Woland or the police are responsible for the master's disappearance, but a member of Woland's retinue, Azazello, offers to reunite them if Margarita will agree to become a witch and host Woland's ball. Woland's power frightens her, but she alone among the novel's characters uses it for her own—often altruistic—ends. Perhaps the most striking example is Margarita's request, when Woland offers her a reward for hosting the ball, that Frieda be released from her eternal torment, the nightly appearance of the handkerchief with which she suffocated her baby. Unlike Faust, Margarita is happy to have made her bargain with Woland; when she wakes up the morning after the ball back in the natural world, everything is "as if it ought to have been so" (p. 331). Is it her love, albeit adulterous, for the master that prevails? Is it her commitment to the value of his art? Since she and the master leave this world at the end of the novel, what kind of triumph does she achieve?

In a sense, Bulgakov's novel follows them. The final chapter concludes in the supernatural world, and the epilogue concludes in the novel's

material world. But both ultimately end with the last sentence of the master's manuscript, as if to suggest that only in art do we ever find complete resolution. Throughout the novel, Bulgakov has exploited art's capacity to represent the unassimilable, the unfathomable, the illogical. At the same time, he reminds us of its related capacity to fulfill dreams. The results elicit terror, laughter, sadness, and wonder.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why does Woland come to Moscow? Why does he give a public performance at the Variety Theater?
2. Why is Woland the instrument of Margarita's kindness toward Frieda and the master?
3. When Woland sees Margarita's compassion for Pilate, why does he tell her, "Everything will turn out right, the world is built on that"? (p. 382)
4. Why has the master earned peace, but not light?
5. Why does Pilate dream that he is involved in an "interesting and endless" argument with Yeshua, "this philosopher, who had thought up such an incredibly absurd thing as that all men are good," and that Yeshua's execution never took place? (p. 319)
6. Why must Margarita become a witch and host Woland's ball in order to rescue and be reunited with the master?
7. Why does Margarita become devoted to the master's novel?
8. Why is the story of Pontius Pilate presented as not only written by the master, but also told by Woland, dreamed by Ivan, and read by Margarita?
9. When Woland asks what she wants, why does Margarita choose to free Frieda from her punishment?
10. Why must the master and Margarita leave the material world at the end of the novel?

11. Why does Woland insist, against the beliefs of Berlioz and Ivan, that Jesus really existed?
12. When Nikanor Ivanovich dreams that he is being interrogated, why does interrogation take the form of a number in a stage production?
13. Why is the master's real name never revealed?

## For Further Reflection

1. To what extent do individuals control their own fate?
2. Would acts of goodness have the same meaning in the absence of acts of evil?
3. What are the similarities between religious and aesthetic experience?

## About Mikhail Bulgakov

Born in 1891 in Kiev, now the capitol of Ukraine, Mikhail Bulgakov studied medicine at Kiev University, practicing briefly before being drafted by the Whites (anti-Bolsheviks) in 1918 as a field doctor. He was sent to the Caucasus, where, after leaving the military, he began working as a journalist. Along with humorous sketches, Bulgakov wrote *White Guard* (1924), an autobiographical novel about his experience in the Civil War and one of the first serious works of literature on the subject. *The Days of the Turbins* (1926), a play based on *White Guard*, was supposedly one of Joseph Stalin's favorites and helped establish Bulgakov as one of Russia's preeminent playwrights.

However, the reaction of the press to Bulgakov's plays in an ever more ideologically rigid society was hostile, and all of his plays were banned in 1929. He wrote to the government about his plight, and Stalin replied, sending him to work at the Moscow Art Theater. Bulgakov adapted Gogol's *Dead Souls* and Cervantes' *Don Quixote* for the stage, but he also wrote plays about Moliere and Pushkin that portrayed the conflict between artists and repressive governments. His works were usually banned once they began public performances, and so Bulgakov took a position as a

librettist with the Bolshoi Opera in 1936. In 1939, he attempted a return to drama, as well as the good graces of the Soviet authorities, by writing *Batum*, a play about Stalin's early years as a revolutionary, but it was banned before rehearsals started.

Bulgakov began working on *The Master and Margarita*, his masterpiece, as early as 1928; he dictated the final revisions weeks before his death in 1940. In 1932, he married his third wife, Elena Shilovskaia, thought to be a model for Margarita. Bulgakov knew he could never publish such a subversive novel during his lifetime. The existence of the manuscript was unknown to all but a small group of people until *Moskva*, a monthly magazine, finally published it, heavily censored, in two parts, in 1966 and 1967.

## Related Titles

### **Lewis Carroll, *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland and Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* (1865; 1871)**

Their reputation as children's classics notwithstanding, these books, about a little girl's journey through imaginary worlds inhabited by extraordinary creatures, suggest the confining nature of the habits of thought that characterize adulthood.

### **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust* (1808, 1832)**

An alchemist strikes a bargain with the devil in this endlessly rich monument of Western literature.

### **Nikolai Gogol, *Dead Souls* (1842)**

The hero of this influential novel embarks on a fraudulent money-making scheme involving the purchase of recently deceased serfs, or souls, from a series of increasingly bizarre owners. A vivid, absurd portrait emerges of the conditions endured by nineteenth-century Russians.

**Victor Pelevin, *The Life of Insects* (1998)**

In this allegorical novel, an American and two Russians meet at a seaside resort hotel to discuss a business proposition. They also happen to be simultaneously humans and insects, as are the others characters in this unsettling vision of post-Soviet life.

**François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532–1564)**

This early French epic, which earned its author persecution from the targets of its fantastical satire, employs an enormous range of literary forms to create an encyclopedic anatomy of French life during the Renaissance.