

Master and Margarita Discussion Questions

1. Bulgakov is satirizing Stalin's Russia, with its policing of people's thoughts and denunciations by neighbors. What specific events in the story seem satirical of soviet life? Are there any parallels with current events? In such a totalitarian state, why are the authorities unable to stop Woland?
2. The book has been characterized as "Lewis Carroll meets Solzhenitsyn." Scholars have also found important connections to Pushkin (Evgeny Onegin), Gogol (Dead Souls), Goethe (Faust), Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy. Did you recognize any of these references?
3. Is there more than one "master" in the story? Who are the disciples?
4. Is the narrator omniscient? Did you notice any shifts in viewpoint?
5. This book was heavily censored in its first publication in a literary journal (1966.) In this restored edition, can you see efforts of the author to avoid coming to the attention of censors? What ways does censorship appear within the book?
6. It's been said that Bulgakov provides a soundtrack for his story. How does he use music and nature to mimic moods and action?
7. What kind of Devil does Bulgakov portray, and what worldview does this choice suggest? Do his victims appear to be random? How do the characters bring about their own fate?
8. Woland says he is visiting Moscow to see if people there have changed. He implies that people are born evil, that evil is essential. He grants peace to Margarita and the Master but not "Light". Does this seem contradictory? What kind of fate do the Master and Margarita inhabit at the end of the book, and does this satisfy your readerly thirst for justice? Why must they leave the material world?
9. What is Bulgakov saying about religion? What are the roles of redemption and resurrection in the novel?
10. When Woland sees Margarita's compassion for Pilate, why does he tell her "Everything will turn out right, the world is built on that"?
11. When Woland asks what she wants for herself, why does Margarita choose Frieda's freedom over the Master's?
12. Why does Woland insist, against the beliefs of Berlioz and Ivan ("Rational Atheists") , that Jesus really existed?
13. Why do you think the author portrays the Muscovites' real life as surreal, while describing the events in ancient Jerusalem in a coolly factual manner? How does this mundane depiction of Jesus compare with the Gospel?

Bulgakov Bio:

Born Kiev 1891. Academic family. Father died of kidney failure at age 50. Bulgakov died of same disease at same age.

Educated in Ukraine as a doctor, served in Red Cross. Drafted into White Army as doctor during Civil War. Began writing novels and memoirs. Medical discharge. Tried to emigrate West but too ill.

Moved to Moscow. Successful career as playwright, a favorite of Stalin despite White Army service. Requested again to emigrate but turned down. All of his plays had been banned by 1929.

Master and Margarita manuscript hidden for 11 years while Bulgakov continued to rework it. His apartment was raided in 1926 and his diaries and manuscript for Heart of a Dog were seized and copied. They were returned to him, but he burned most of these. He also burned Master and Margarita and started over from notes.

All of Bulgakov's books were banned by 1939. Plays he wrote were generally shut down after the premieres. He continued to work as a stage producer, adapting Don Quixote, Faust, and Lost Souls for the stage.

His wife kept M & M hidden after his death in 1940 and it was only published in 1966 during the Khrushchev era. People memorized quotes and it became a way to speak in code. There were several movie versions; the most recent was an 8 hour 2005 TV epic that was very popular, available on YouTube.

Heart of a Dog was first published in 1987, possibly from the copy made by the Secret Police.

Helpful List of some of the Characters:

Ivan Homeless

Berlioz - tram victim

Stepan ("Styopa") - his flatmate

Dr. Stravinsky - the psychiatrist

Grigory Rimsky - Theater findirector (flees on the train)

Ivan Vareukha - Theater manager (Hella turns him into a vampire)

Vasily Lastochin - Theater bookkeeper -arrested

Andrey Sokov- Theater bartender - liver cancer

Maxamilian Poplavsky - Berlioz' uncle from Kiev

Woland - Satanic Stalin parody

Behemoth - cat

Koroviev - ("Fagot")

Azezello - KGB chief prototype

Hella - their "maid"

Natasha - Margarita's maid

Nikolay- changed into a pig