

An analysis of key features and targets of Bulgakov's satirical style

The curtains to *Collaborators*¹ open, and on stage the audience sees the character of Mikhail Bulgakov in the midst of a nightmare in which he and the dictator, Josef Stalin, are engaged in what seems to be a cat and mouse chase. Suddenly Bulgakov trips and finds himself spreadeagled at the feet of his pursuer, who is poised to attack him with a typewriter. Before anything else happens - Bulgakov wakes up. This slapstick scene may have been designed to entertain but was undoubtedly a metaphor for Mikhail Bulgakov's personal struggles as a writer in post-revolutionary Russia. Mikhail Afanas'evich Bulgakov was born in 1891 and died in 1940 as a result of sclerosis of the kidneys. His life spanned a tumultuous period of Russian history, experiencing the turbulent transformation from a Tsarist monarchy to a suffocating Communist regime where every aspect of rich Russian culture and art came under the scrutiny of the administration. In this environment Bulgakov's career as an author and playwright was a constant uphill battle against censorship and criticism. He was despised by his detractors who described him as 'yesterday's man', which politely meant 'today's enemy' because of the style and content of his works. This inevitably led to immense disappointment and frustration for the artist. Bulgakov expressed his feelings through hundreds of forthright letters to the government; in one dated 28th March 1930 he states, 'After the banning of all my literary works, many people who knew me as a writer began to offer me only one and the same piece of advice. To write a 'Communist play' and in addition to address the government of the USSR with a repentant letter containing a renunciation of my former views as expressed in my literary works, together with assurances that henceforth I shall work as a fellow-traveller writer, devoted to the idea of Communism. The aim: to save myself from persecution, poverty and final inevitable ruin. I did not heed this advice.'²In these letters, Bulgakov tried to protect his freedom by using buffoonery in long, comedic and calculated essay structured letters, occasionally signing them 'Tarzan'³. However the letters vividly illustrated the writers' personal struggles within the restricted society in

¹ <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3252528/>

² p268 *Mikhail Bulgakov – A Critical Biography* by Lesley Milne

³ p190 *Mikhail Bulgakov – A Critical Biography* by Lesley Milne

which he lived. A close friend of the author, Anna Akhmatova in a poem tribute titled 'To the memory of M.B.' suggests his mindset was that of 'a prisoner's mentality' as captured in the phrase 'You gasped for breath within stifling walls'. Officialdom tormented many writers in Stalinist Russia who failed to paint a joyful image of the society. For example, Osip Mandelstam was sent to the gulag and the dictator was the helping hand to Vladimir Mayakovsky's suicide. Bulgakov however did not suffer the same fate. Fortunately, Stalin enjoyed *The White Guard* so much, watching it no less than 15 times⁴ and took a personal interest in the author's career. The works that establish the author are the play *The White Guard*, first published in 1925 and later adapted into a play first performed at the Moscow Arts Theatre in 1926 as *Days of the Turbins*⁵. The second, *The Master and Margarita* was written in secret between 1928 and his death in 1940. It was never published during his lifetime and not in Russia until 1973. However, a full copy was leaked in Germany in 1963⁶ and is a reflection of how censorship and official prejudice meant that recognition of Bulgakov's writing has been largely posthumous.

Throughout his work in and out of literature, Bulgakov kept true to the satirical nature clearly illustrated in his journals⁷. It was a way in which he could illustrate and express his opinions on life in Russia and the political situation experienced during his lifetime. Among the chief targets of his satire was the phenomenon of institutionalisation and its prominence in post-revolutionary Russian life. Institutionalisation is a mind-set that refers to the process of embedding some conception or belief within an organisation or society as a whole⁸. Stalinist Russia had a deeply intolerant ideological outlook⁹. The

⁴ <http://russiapedia.rt.com/prominent-russians/literature/mikhail-bulgakov/>

⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_White_Guard

⁶ p3 *Mikhail Bulgakov – A Critical Biography* by Lesley Milne

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http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/non_fictionreviews/10231905/Diaries-and-Selected-Letters-by-Mikhail-Bulgakov-review.html

⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Institutionalisation>

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<https://books.google.com.hk/books?id=91kYrzkVARsC&pg=PA119&lpg=PA119&dq=anti-soviet+behaviour&source=bl&ots=NbvLJxMmPQ&sig=Fh202ldzI9c8hFWLgjWCX>

administration dictated how the public lived their life and what freedoms they had and didn't have. Counter revolutionary behaviour was monitored at every level of society. Political abuse of psychiatry was employed to eliminate opponents. People who openly expressed their beliefs and disagreed with their leaders were diagnosed as suffering from a mental disorder known as 'philosophical intoxication'¹⁰. Another frequent target of Bulgakov's satire was welfare, culture and bureaucracy under the Soviet system and he employed his literary techniques to highlight hypocrisy in the system. It is evident that these are chief targets because Bulgakov invests so much artistic energy in depicting and satirising them. Powerful examples of his strong personal and authorial tone are his works, *The White Guard* and *The Master and Margarita*. The literary techniques clearly evident in these works are the use of the surreal and weird, irony and symbolism.

Through the use of the surreal and the weird, Bulgakov is able to portray his personal satirical targets in his works *The White Guard* and especially *The Master and Margarita*. The latter novel has a fragmented structure comprising 'mini scenes' that narrate bizarre and apparently unconnected events that take place in the lives of considerably small characters. The connecting threads between all these surreal episodes are the machinations of the central character, Woland. For example in Chapter 18, *Hapless Visitors*,¹¹ Bulgakov describes the events in a day in the life of the barman at the Variety Theatre who also doubles as the buffet manager. The chapter starts by describing his journey and agenda for the day and ends up in a lavish and bizarre apartment where strange objects are scattered around the room such as 'a funereal cloak lined with fiery cloth,' and 'on the pier-glass table lay a long sword with a gleaming gold hilt.' In this apartment he has a meeting with a dark and mysterious character where he receives a complaint regarding the colour of feta cheese. Subsequently he is

aUFoec&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0CC4Q6AEwBGoVChMIiLih_4yCwxIVxIyUCh2Jcgi-
#v=onepage&q=anti-soviet%20behaviour&f=false

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https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Political_abuse_of_psy psychiatry_in_the_Soviet_Union

¹¹ p195-214, *The Master and Margarita*, Mikhail Bulgakov ISBN: 978-0-140-45546-5

informed that he is going to die of liver cancer in nine months! After all this commotion, the buffet manager/barman ends up in a hospital where he's diagnosed as a schizophrenic and a crook. Amongst these obtuse events, black magic pervades the action such as the random transformation of inert objects in the doctor's office into a black kitten just after the buffet manager leaves.

Bulgakov uses this fantastical theme to indicate that everything is somehow tainted or touched by the devil (Woland). Interpreting the satirical element to this style points towards the author's views on institutionalisation in Stalinist Russia, where the administration's interference affected every detail of all Russian lives. It is poignant to reference a discussion about the quality of a luxury food item, such as feta cheese, when it is estimated that 6 million people died of starvation in 1932-33, considered by some to have been caused by the government's policy of collectivisation of agriculture¹². *The Master and Margarita* references religion and free will through the employment of black magic and the presence of the Devil. Bulgakov's personal views seep through regarding his perception of the situation in Stalinist Russia - for example, the lack of freedom of expression in Russia. Through using the weird and surreal, Bulgakov makes a satire on rationality and how people attempt to explain everything forensically without a hint of imagination in their answers. Repeatedly throughout the novel we see characters in irrational situations scrambling in the dark for rational answers. For example, in the chapter *News from Yalta*, the characters Varenuška and Rimsky are extremely confused about the activities of Woland. 'Varenuška did everything that a man in a moment of great astonishment ought to do. He raced up and down the office, he raised his arms twice like one crucified, he drank a whole glass of yellowish water from the carafe and exclaimed: 'I don't understand! I don't understand! I don't understand!' Rimsky meanwhile was looking out the window, thinking hard about something. The findirector's position was very difficult. It was necessary at once, right on the spot, to invent ordinary explanations for extraordinary phenomena.'¹³

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Soviet_famine_of_1932-33#Estimation_of_the_loss_of_life

¹³ p108, *The Master and Margarita*, Mikhail Bulgakov ISBN: 978-0-140-45546-5

In the play, *The White Guard*, Bulgakov's employment of the weird and surreal is demonstrated through the quick entrances of new characters in the play - only for them to be killed off shortly after entering the stage. For example in Act 3 when the 'Man with Basket'¹⁴ enters, he is present for less than a full scene before he is killed. Introducing a character only for them die within the course of that scene is an emphatic device. The satirical target of this is to suggest the work of the secret police and the frequent nocturnal disappearances of people that was a sinister reality of life in Stalinist Russia. Another way that Bulgakov uses the surreal and weird in *The White Guard* is through the setting and the strange characters that appear in these places. For example, the character of Maxim¹⁵ and his appearance from a cubby hole at an abandoned school where army troops are hiding out and his horrified reaction to these intruders, 'Burning the benches in the stoves?! It's vandalism! The headmasters ordered me to...' Maxim's constant agenda to avoid the troops desecrating the school can be seen as a metaphor for Bulgakov's concern over the deprivation of educational opportunities under the revolutionary regime.

Irony exists on many levels in Bulgakov's works. Such as verbal irony, when a speaker's meaning is the opposite of what they are saying. Situational irony, when the actual result of a situation is totally different from its expectation. Finally dramatic irony occurs when the audience or reader knows a key piece of information that the characters in the work do not.¹⁶ The work that first brought Bulgakov to the great attention of the Russian public and the Bolshevik orthodoxy in government was his play *The Days of the Turbins* based on his book, *The White Guard*. Indeed the subject matter and the popular, critical reaction to the play are in itself ironic, and it seems unlikely that a writer as observant and sensitive as Bulgakov would not be fully aware of the potential for furore and personal hazard that such a topic at such a time could cause. It is ironic that in post-revolutionary Russia this play about a family at war on the side of the

¹⁴ p53

¹⁵ p56

¹⁶ <http://blog.flocabulary.com/definitions-and-examples-of-irony-in-literature/>

officially despised tsarist intelligentsia should be so popularly received by the Russian public and establish Bulgakov as a celebrated dramatist. Bulgakov's sympathetic depiction of the cozy domesticity of the Turbin family with their large living quarters and pleasant distractions would have been in stark contrast to the circumstances of many of the Russians in the audience. This celebrity juxtaposed with the reaction of politically correct Bolshevik idealists to *The White Guard's* sympathetic treatment of perceived enemies of the revolution and proletariat. Consequently the play and Bulgakov himself became the subject of a vituperative press campaign that dogged the rest of his artistic life. In a letter to the Soviet government, Bulgakov states that in 'my album of cuttings, I found that in the ten years of my literary career I have collected 301 reviews from the Soviet press. Of these, 3 are positive; 298 are hostile and abusive. These 298 mirror my life as a writer.' In a crucial ironic twist the very leader of the country, Josef Stalin, openly admired the play, watching it no less than 15 times¹⁷, and appeared to respect the writer's candour and transparency. Stalin's patronage was key to Bulgakov's survival in Russia; a contrast to the fate of other writers such as Isaac Babel and Osip Mandelstam who were arrested and brutally killed¹⁸. In November 1934 the Leningrad party boss, Sergei Kirov, accompanied Stalin to watch *The White Guard* and four days later was himself assassinated. The dramatic irony being that his murder was almost certainly ordered by the man sitting next to him at the play. Bulgakov's wife, Yelena, reported that Kirov did not clap at the end of the play and she suggested, 'it's possible that the last play he saw in his life was *The Days of the Turbins*.'¹⁹

There is irony in a writer labouring over a work he believed was unlikely to ever be published as evidenced by his exclamation 'all my works are hopeless' and 'personally, I myself, threw down the manuscript of the novel about the devil in [the] furnace'²⁰. This frustration also surfaced in the memorable and much

¹⁷ <http://www.standard.co.uk/goingout/theatre/stalin-s-secret-love-affair-with-the-white-guard-6705761.html>

¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_the_Soviet_Union#Stalin_era

¹⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/mar/20/will-self-white-guard-bulgakov>

²⁰ <http://jwaala-bakvaas.blogspot.fr/2011/08/bulgakovs-lettres-to-stalin.html>

quoted line, 'manuscripts don't burn'²¹. The irony of the unlikely relationship between Stalin and Bulgakov is echoed in *The Master and Margarita* where Stalin can be inferred in Woland and the author himself in the Master²². The reader is warned of the unconventional character of Satan as Woland in the epigraph credited to Mephistopheles²³, 'I am part of that power which eternally wills evil and eternally works good.' Through the actions of Woland and his retinue Bulgakov is suggesting that good and evil exist in everyone and are as inseparable as light and shade. Repeatedly the reader sees the Devil, Woland, perform good tasks for individuals whilst punishing the small minded and greedy, at odds with what is said in the Bible²⁴. For example when Yeshua Ha- Nozri asks for peace on behalf of the Master, Woland poses a question to Mathew Levi, 'what would your good do if evil did not exist, and what would the earth look like if shadows disappeared from it? After all, shadows are cast by objects and people. There is the shadow of my sword. But there are also shadows of trees and living creatures. Would you like to denude the earth of all the trees and all living beings in order to satisfy your fantasy of rejoicing in the naked light?'²⁵ It can be perceived that many of the characters in the novel are paralleled in the real world. For example it is recognizable to many readers that one of Woland's henchmen, Azazello, embodies a chief of the secret police. It has also been said that Bulgakov's wife, Yelena Shilovskaya, inspired Margarita.

There is irony in the roles of Jesus and the Devil in *The Master and Margarita*. According to conventional expectations, Jesus is compassionate, serving, loving, forgiving, committed, prayerful, gentle, patient, self-controlled and humble²⁶ whereas Bulgakov portrays Jesus (Yeshua Ha-Nozri) as funny, cowardly and occasionally manipulative. In Chapter 2, *Pontius Pilate*, Bulgakov uses the analogy of light equaling to good and shadow equaling evil to depict the prominent sunlight during Yeshua's hearing. The repeated emphasis of light versus shade, good versus evil is Bulgakov's way of contrasting the monotony of

²¹ Woland p287 *The Master and Margarita*

²² <http://jim-murdoch.blogspot.fr/2009/10/master-and-margarita.html>

²³ Epigraph – *The Master and Margarita*

²⁴ http://www.godandscience.org/doctrine/who_is_satan.html

²⁵ Chapter 29

²⁶ <http://www.whatchristianswanttoknow.com/10-character-traits-of-jesus-to-emulate/>

life in communist Russia. Bulgakov uses situational irony from the outset of his novel. Following the heated discussion between the unbelieving Berlioz, head of the literary bureaucracy MASSOLIT, and Woland about belief in God, the former's death is prophesied by the latter. The death prophecy is subsequently fulfilled in extraordinary circumstances with Berlioz losing his head. This is witnessed by his acolyte, the poet Ivan Nikolaevich otherwise referred to under his fashionable proletarian moniker Ivan Homeless. The poet attempts to pursue Woland and warn his associates at MASSOLIT of the recent bizarre death of Berlioz. His journey through Moscow's streets to Griboedov's²⁷ in nothing but his underwear results only in his incarceration in a lunatic asylum.

Symbolism is a satirical technique used subtly in both the works *The Master and Margarita* and *The White Guard* to explore the author's satirical targets – the mind-set of institutionalisation and soviet welfare, culture and bureaucracy. The use of animals and nature symbols is evident in both works. In *The Master and Margarita* the numerous appearances of a sparrow symbolise the embodiment of Woland. This is significant because everyone and everything in the novel is somehow tainted or touched by the Devil. For example, at the moment that Pilate annuls Yeshua Ha-Nozri's death sentence, 'The swallow's wings flicked over the Hegemon's head; the bird darted toward the bowl of the fountain, and escaped to freedom.'²⁸ Whilst the bird does not directly influence this event, Bulgakov uses its presence as a symbol to suggest to his readers who it embodies. Later in Chapter 18 the sparrow represents the workings of the Devil because of its bizarre behaviour. The character Professor Kuzmin discovers the bird erratically jumping on his desk,²⁹ 'the wretched bird limped on its left foot, obviously clowning and dragging it, moving in syncopation – in short, it was dancing a fox trot to the music of the phonograph like a drunk in a bar, staring at the professor as impudently and provokingly as it could'. Since it is not the first time that the reader is introduced to the swallow, the graphic description of the birds

²⁷ Headquarters of MASSOLIT

²⁸ Chapter 2 *The Master and Margarita*, Mikhail Bulgakov ISBN: 978-0-140-45546-5

²⁹ Chapter 18 *The Master and Margarita*, Mikhail Bulgakov ISBN: 978-0-140-45546-5

behaviour solidifies that the swallow symbolises the Devil. Perhaps Bulgakov uses this symbol to portray the bureaucracy and culture in Stalinist Russia. With the character of Woland acting as a parallel to Stalin; the embodiment of the Devil through the sparrow suggests to the reader that the administration watches everything and everyone. Bulgakov's own works were a victim of this intense surveillance; the searching of his apartment and confiscation of diaries and manuscripts by the secret police and the continuous censorship of his works, all sparked by the popularity of his first controversial play *The White Guard*. The use of nature sometimes reflects the moods of characters *The Master and Margarita*. The weather mirrors the woeful Ivan Homeless when he gets tearful whilst reading a report on Berlioz's death. 'Outside the window, water tumbled down in a solid sheet. Again and again fiery threads flashed in the sky, the sky cracked, and the patient's room was flooded with fitful, frightening light.'³⁰ With the exception of the reflection of moods and weather to emphasize a feeling or event it seems that throughout the novel nature carries on as normal and that it is in fact humans who act against their own natures. This theme is also present in *The White Guard*. The character, Lariosik, ponders that 'the weather was magnificent when I left the house. Clear sky, the stars shining, no guns firing... everything in nature was perfect. But I only have to step out of doors for it automatically to start snowing'³¹, an illustration of how a civil war brings out the worst in people – yet it only affects humans, not the environment around them. *The White Guard* is based around the military and political events of the civil war in Russia. In *The Master and Margarita* other political events are also mentioned. This common feature of the two works suggests to the reader that Bulgakov is profoundly influenced by the political events and culture around him; his biographer Lesley Milne states that he was born into the tsarist intelligentsia and was a 'monarchist by conviction' and 'against the death penalty'³². In *The Master and Margarita* Bulgakov references the trial of Henry Pagoda and Pavel Bulanov³³ and introduces Baron Meigel³⁴. These characters all had direct links to

³⁰ Chapter 11 *The Master and Margarita*, Mikhail Bulgakov ISBN: 978-0-140-45546-5

³¹ p81 Act 4 *The White Guard*, Mikhail Bulgakov ISBN: 0-413-64530-4

³² Milne, Leslie 1990. *Mikhail Bulgakov: a critical biography* p5-6

³³ p270 *The Master and Margarita*, Mikhail Bulgakov ISBN: 978-0-140-45546-5

Soviet Russia. Pagoda and Bulanov organised uprisings and admitted in court that they were against the Party and were part of an underground anti-Soviet organisation³⁵. Baron Meigel was a character based upon Baron Borish Sergeevich Shteiger who worked in the Visual Arts Department in Moscow whilst also doubling as an agent of the NKVD³⁶; his role was to report on foreigners connected with the theatre and Russian citizens who contacted the embassy. He was later arrested and shot in 1937³⁷. In *The Master and Margarita* Woland orders Abaddon to kill Meigel as he suspects the Baron is attempting to eavesdrop on him. Bulgakov infers the events surrounding these characters to symbolise the treachery and intolerance in Stalinist Russia.

Mikhail Bulgakov's literary career was tiresome and turbulent. His frustrations were clearly illustrated in the many letters that he sent to the Soviet government throughout his life. He complained 'in the ten years of my literary career I have collected 301 reviews from the Soviet press. Of these, 3 are positive; 298 are hostile and abusive. These 298 mirror my life as a writer.'³⁸ However this did not stop the authors literary pursuit and whilst acknowledgement came almost entirely after his death he is now considered one of Russia's most acclaimed contemporary writers of the 20th Century³⁹. He was a writer whose imagination and literary targets did not fit in to a post-revolutionary Russia where he was disparaged as a 'yesterday's man' which roughly equated to 'today's enemy'⁴⁰. His powerful work, *The White Guard*, brought him fame whilst he was alive though it was received both positively and negatively. It's been said that 'on occasions of its premiere, in October 1926, members of the audience groaned and even fainted when they saw their own predicament faithfully recounted,

³⁴ p279 *The Master and Margarita*, Mikhail Bulgakov ISBN: 978-0-140-45546-5

³⁵ <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1938/trial/3.htm>

³⁶ <http://spartacus-educational.com/RUSnkvd.htm>

³⁷ <http://www.masterandmargarita.eu/en/03karakters/meigel.html>

³⁸ Letter of 28 march 1930 to the Soviet government

³⁹ <http://global.britannica.com/biography/Mikhail-Afanasyevich-Bulgakov>

⁴⁰ L. Yanovskaya *Yunost* (1977) p65 Mikhail Bulgakov – A critical biography, Lesley Milne ISBN: 978-0-521-12246-7

without the Whites being portrayed as vile oppressors.’⁴¹ Many people were outraged by his rich, lavish writing that offered complex ideas, a style so opposite to the considerably narrow society in which they lived. It is noteworthy that through his bitter and authorial tone deeply embedded in his works that it’s suggested to the reader and audience what Bulgakov was targeting. Through his tireless artistic energy, readers can depict that he employed the surreal and weird, irony and symbolism to portray in particular the mind-set of institutionalisation and the satire that he poses on Soviet welfare, culture and bureaucracy. Bulgakov wrote *The Master and Margarita* through the terrorising Stalinist era in which the dictator toyed with the author through censorship, phone calls and searches done by the secret police. This relationship certainly influenced this institutionalised evil that is embedded at the core of the novels plot. It was censored for the obvious correlation between the Devil, Woland, living in a post-revolutionary Moscow and Stalin who was the centre of all terrifying power that led to starvation and death for many people. However, *The White Guard* was actually held in high favour by Josef Stalin. Weirdly, on one occasion Stalin watched the performance accompanied by his guest Sergei Kirov (Leningrad party boss) who didn’t seem to enjoy the play as much was assassinated four days later. It is ironic as Bulgakov’s wife Yelena reports, ‘it’s possible that the last play he saw in his life was *The Days of the Turbins* (also known as the *White Guard*)’. Bulgakov will remain famous for the trials and tribulations he faced pursuing his endless endeavour to demonstrate to the world his satirical outlook on life and literature. The political culture of Stalinist Russia at the time and the affect that it had on the crazy bureaucracy followed by the ignorant way people led their lives will forever be Bulgakov’s downfall and the reason why he was never an acclaimed writer and playwright whilst he was alive. However he will be respected for arguably one of the most interesting and bizarre books, *The Master and Margarita*.

⁴¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2010/mar/20/will-self-white-guard-bulgakov>

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