

# Mythological Motifs in The Master and Margarita: An Intertextual and Symbolic Analysis

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**Abstract-** This paper conducts an in-depth exploration of the mythological motifs in *The Master and Margarita*, focusing on the novel's multilayered character system. It examines how Mikhail Bulgakov integrates mythology, religion, and literary traditions to construct a narrative rich in intertextuality and symbolic meaning. The analysis centers on the characters of the Master, Margarita, Woland, and his retinue, revealing their deep intertextual connections with classic texts such as the Bible and Faust. It argues that these mythological motifs play a crucial role in shaping the characters, advancing the plot, and expressing philosophical themes. Through close textual reading and cultural comparison, this study shows that *The Master and Margarita* is not merely a work of fantasy but a literary masterpiece that reflects Bulgakov's profound contemplation on good and evil, faith, freedom, and Soviet reality. This research aims to deepen the understanding of the relationship between mythology and character construction in Bulgakov's work and to provide new interpretive perspectives on its literary and cultural significance.

**Keywords-** Bulgakov; *The Master and Margarita*; mythic motifs; interculturality; cultural contexts.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The significance of *The Master and Margarita* lies in its ability to synthesize multiple literary traditions into a unified yet paradoxical narrative system. Unlike conventional realist novels, Bulgakov's work operates at the intersection of myth, history, and satire.

The novel emerged during a period of intense ideological control in the Soviet Union, where literature was expected to conform to socialist realism. Against this backdrop, Bulgakov's use of mythological structures can be interpreted as a form of intellectual resistance. Myth becomes a "safe language" through which forbidden philosophical and religious ideas can be expressed.

Importantly, the novel reflects what scholars describe as the "mythological turn" of 20th-century literature — a movement in which writers re-engage with ancient narratives to reinterpret modern crises. So new paragraph with tab start to continue previ-ous content with relvant but slightly new topic explanation.

The fate of this novel is quite complex. The first draft was destroyed by the author himself, and work on the book continued almost until the very end of his life. Bulgakov conceived this novel about Satan as early as the 1920s, but it was not until the 1930s that the plot was finally finished. The work is based on three storylines:

- The Bible—the story of Pontius Pilate and Jesus.

- Fantasy—the story of Woland and his retinue arriving in Moscow in the 1930s.
- Realism—the tragic love story of "the Master" and "Margarita", which contains autobiographical themes (Bulgakov himself and his wife, Yelena Sergeevna).

## II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To deepen the analysis, this study incorporates several theoretical perspectives.

### Intertextuality

The novel can be interpreted through intertextuality, where meaning emerges through the interaction of multiple texts. In this case, key intertexts include the Bible and Faust, which shape both narrative structure and thematic development.

### Myth Criticism

Myth functions as a symbolic and structural system that conveys universal meanings. In Bulgakov's novel, mythological motifs provide a framework for interpreting ethical and existential questions.

### Dialogism

According to Mikhail Bakhtin, literary texts contain multiple interacting voices. This concept is essential for understanding the coexistence of ideological perspectives in the novel.

## III. ANALYSIS OF MYTHOLOGICAL MOTIFS

### The Master as an Authorial Figure

In the novel “The Master and Margarita”, the character of the Master bears distinct autobiographical traits, leading readers to identify him with Mikhail Afanasyevich Bulgakov himself. Although the novel’s central figure was originally a professor of demonology, the author later replaced him with the Master—a writer whose creative fate closely mirrors Bulgakov’s personal experiences; in effect, he serves as the au-thor’s alter ego within the work.

At the same time Bulgakov’s relationship with Joseph Stalin was both complex and controversial. In the 1920s, his play “The Turbins” was a huge success on the stage, and it is said that Stalin himself was among its admirers. However, by the 1930s, the situation had changed: Bulgakov’s works came under strict censorship, his plays were banned, and the writer himself found himself in a difficult situation, having lost his means of livelihood. On April 18, 1930, Stalin spoke with Bulgakov by telephone, and his play was restaged, but this “leniency” did not last long. In other words, Stalin first gave Bulgakov hope, only to take it away again. Like Bulgakov, the Master also wrote a work on a tragic and banned theme—in his case, a novel about Pontius Pilate and Jesus that touched upon religious issues strictly forbidden during the Soviet era. “Bulgakov through this character and the fate of his work”: his works were subject to strict censorship, with many not permitted for publication or banned after publication. Also, the idea that “manuscripts do not burn” represents the resilience of artistic truth.

### Margarita and the Eternal Feminine

The romantic subplot between the protagonist and Margarita did not appear until the second edition of the novel. The character of Margarita was largely inspired by Bulgakov’s last wife. Researchers have noted striking similarities between them, down to the smallest details, such as their narrowed eyes. L. Yanovskaya points out in her work “The Creative Path of Mikhail Bulgakov” that Margarita has become a beautiful, generalized, and poetic image of “the woman of love”. Bulgakov crafted an idealized image of a writer’s wife always ready for self-sacrifice, as exemplified by the scene where Margarita rescues the manuscript from the fire. This scene comes from Chapter 13, “The Appearance of the Protagonist,” in which Margarita bravely pulls the manuscript from the flames with her bare hands. As scholar Liu Xiangwen notes, “Margarita’s actions reveal the spiritual heights of the female character in the work, transcending reality; she is the convergence point of the three identities of human, demon, and god”.

His wife also cared deeply about the fate of the novel: after the writer’s death, it was she who rewrote the novel based on the drafts.

### Woland as a Moral Paradox

In shaping the character of Woland, as well as in the overall conception of the novel “The Master and Margarita”, Bulgakov actively drew upon themes from Goethe’s “Faust”. In the first scene, Woland appears holding a walking stick topped with a black poodle’s head. This is a direct reference to a scene in “Faust”, in which Mephistopheles first takes the form of a black poodle before appearing before Faust in human form. The black poodle is a symbol of deception and the devil, as well as a harbinger of change.

Although both Woland and Mephistopheles play the role of tempter, their methods and goals differ. Mephistopheles tempts Faust with boundless knowledge and pleasure. However, his control over Faust is illusory—a person can never be fully satisfied, and the process of learning is endless. Woland seduced not only the stamp collector but also the Master and Margarita. Margarita had the opportunity to take revenge on the Master’s enemies and fulfill her own wish—to return her beloved to him.

Woland represents a reinterpretation of Mephistopheles and embodies the paradox of evil as a force that produces good. His actions restore moral balance while exposing human flaws.

## IV. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND MYTHOLOGICAL SPACE

In the novel “The Master and Margarita”, we can indeed identify three key temporal and spatial structures that create the effect of a “novel within a novel”. This is the artistic technique known as “mise en abyme,” in which a work contains a nested story that possesses independent meaning while simultaneously complementing the main narrative.

### Jerusalem Narrative

The reinterpretation of the Bible presents Jesus as a humanistic philosopher rather than a divine figure. This shifts the focus toward ethical responsibility.

Pontius Pilate is depicted as a tragic figure, symbolizing moral weakness under political pressure.

### Moscow Narrative

The Moscow setting reflects Soviet society, characterized by bureaucracy, materialism, and ideological control. Bulgakov uses satire to expose these conditions.

### Supernatural Realism

Woland’s ball represents a symbolic space where moral hierarchies collapse. This dimension allows for a reinterpretation of justice beyond institutional frameworks.

## V. CROSS-CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

Reader interpretation varies depending on familiarity with cultural and literary refer-ences. Studies show that non-Russian readers often struggle with the novel's intertex-tual complexity.

## VI. MYTH AND IDEOLOGY

Mythological motifs function as a critique of Soviet ideology. By embedding philo-sophical ideas within myth, Bulgakov circumvents censorship and challenges official narratives. The novel suggests that truth cannot be fully suppressed by political systems. This demonstrates that myth, although universal, is mediated by cultural context.

## VII. CONCLUSION

Mythological motifs in *The Master and Margarita* function as:

- Structural elements
- Symbolic systems
- Philosophical tools
- Political critique mechanisms

Bulgakov transforms myth into a powerful medium for exploring morality, freedom, and truth.

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