

University of Denver

Digital Commons @ DU

---

Electronic Theses and Dissertations

Graduate Studies

---

1-1-2017

## Margarita as Supernatural Woman: Bulgakov's Subversion of the Superfluous Man in *The Master and Margarita*

Jana Marie Domanico  
*University of Denver*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd>



Part of the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [History Commons](#), and the [Russian Literature Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Domanico, Jana Marie, "Margarita as Supernatural Woman: Bulgakov's Subversion of the Superfluous Man in *The Master and Margarita*" (2017). *Electronic Theses and Dissertations*. 1251.  
<https://digitalcommons.du.edu/etd/1251>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Studies at Digital Commons @ DU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ DU. For more information, please contact [jennifer.cox@du.edu](mailto:jennifer.cox@du.edu), [dig-commons@du.edu](mailto:dig-commons@du.edu).

Margarita as Supernatural Woman: Bulgakov's Subversion of the Superfluous Man in

*The Master and Margarita*

---

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of Arts and Humanities

University of Denver

---

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

---

by

Jana M. Domanico

June 2017

Advisor: Dr. Eric Gould

Author: Jana M. Domanico

Title: Margarita as Supernatural Woman: Bulgakov's Subversion of the Superfluous Man in *The Master and Margarita*

Advisor: Dr. Eric Gould

Degree Date: June 2017

## ABSTRACT

The superfluous man is a prevalent motif in Russian literature dating back to the 19th century. While definitions and portrayals of the motif vary by author, the superfluous man is most often associated with his fear of government authority and an inability to take action in his own daily life. The paper explores the shifting definitions of the superfluous man through Russian history throughout the 19th century up until the Soviet era. The paper then examines Mikhail Bulgakov's subversion of the character motif in *The Master and Margarita* through his creation of Margarita, the supernatural woman. The author explores Bulgakov's use of folklore and magical realism to effectively imagine a world outside of Soviet autocracy. The author also critiques Bulgakov's character Margarita through a feminist lens and then proceeds to examine work of Russian female writers who are historically undervalued to reveal that in their own use of Russian folklore and magical realism, the authors are able to explore the possibilities of social change and immortality through the creation of art.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER TWO: SUPERFLUOUS MEN IN <i>THE MASTER AND MARGARITA</i> .....	29
The Master as Superfluous.....	29
Pontius Pilate as Superfluous.....	32
CHAPTER THREE: SUPERNATURAL WOMAN: SUBVERTING THE SUPERNATURAL MAN.....	37
Woland as Chaotic Figure.....	37
Margarita as Supernatural Woman.....	43
CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION.....	61
WORKS CITED.....	80

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In her essay “The Origins of Totalitarianism” Hannah Arendt states that the radical evil associated with oppressive governments cannot be explained “by comprehensible motives” and occurs in totalitarian regimes “in which all men have become equally superfluous” (461). The German-born political theorist goes on to assert that the motivations of such governments can “no longer be explained by “self-interest, greed...lust for power, and cowardice” but by something that “breaks down all standards we know” (461). The superfluous man, a political reaction to the evils of autocratic rule, is a common character type in Russian literature dating back to the 19th century when Turgenev coined the term in his novella “The Diary of a Superfluous Man” (1850). The superfluous man, as constructed and interpreted by critics and authors, is representative of a cultural attitude and time in Russia. While the character type comes in many forms, he is most often associated with a contempt for society, a fear of daily life, and an inability to find meaning in human activity.

Many of the most notable examples of the superfluous man in 19th century literature are associated with great wealth throughout their childhood and are often able to rely on domestic serfs for daily needs. This lack of self-reliance subsequently leads to a disdain for work of all kinds and a listless attitude towards the future (Clardy 3). While

having roots in French and German Romantic literature, the superfluous man became a cultural icon in Russia (Gheith 229). Historical, political, and social threads link the character type of the alienated intellectual to the Russian experience. Russian authors of the 19th century utilized this motif as a means of critiquing Russian society. I plan to break down and examine the shifting definitions of this character in the 19th and 20th centuries while paying close attention to its historical and political connections. By tracking the development of the motif in Russian fiction, I hope to glean new insights into fictional character development of the past and also to unearth the relevance of the superfluous man in current times. Furthermore, as a main test case, I will examine the superfluous men found in Mikhail Bulgakov's masterpiece *The Master and Margarita* (1966) as an entry point to understanding his construction of Margarita, as a supernatural woman to contrast and subvert the commonly used male character type.

Examinations of the superfluous man during the Soviet era are especially important due to the increased oppression experienced by the common man under the regime of the time. Within Bulgakov's novel we see many depictions of the superfluous man. In contrast, we find a variant of the superfluous man in Margarita, someone restricted by society but much more complex in her dealings with the devil and in the development of her supernatural abilities. Though Bulgakov creates characters we may deem superfluous in Turgenev's terms, he redefines these characters through the black magic of Woland and eventually rewards them. Margarita as heroine becomes the vehicle through which Bulgakov creates this new supernatural space. Through the incorporation

of both the folktale and magical realism genre, and through the creation of Margarita, Bulgakov subverts the superfluous man motif of his predecessors not only to highlight the plight of the Soviet citizen, but also to propose the possibility of escape through the immortality of art. Bulgakov creates Margarita, a female representation of Goethe's *Faust* (Stenbock-Fermor 316) , to complicate and transcend Soviet societal restrictions.

Although Margarita's dissatisfaction and restlessness align her categorically with superfluity, upon Woland's intervention she becomes a supernatural woman operating outside the boundaries of Soviet Russia. No longer restrained by daily life, Margarita is a fictional representation of the chaos and complexity of Russian society. She is at once merciless, benevolent, bold, and stubborn. Bulgakov's choice to create a female hero represents his belief in the power of art to inspire change and heal. Just as "manuscripts don't burn," (Bulgakov 245) perhaps the most famous quote within *The Master and Margarita*, Margarita, as hero, lives on in Russia's consciousness. Many female Russian authors use similar genre complexity to create equally interesting and complicated female characters in the wake of Margarita's creation which I will explore more fully later in this thesis.

Moreover, while I find it impossible and irrelevant to argue that Bulgakov is a feminist writer, I believe Bulgakov's creation of Margarita and the attention given to her in the second half of the novel reveal some of the first glimmerings of a feminist consciousness in Russian patriarchal society and should be recognized as such. In my conclusion I hope to direct the reader to female Russian authors who completely defy the

superfluous character pattern and move outside of the patriarchal imagination. By creating a realistic female psyche and highlighting exemplary and urgent internal transformations in their female characters, Russian female authors deserve similar attention to their male counterparts since their work not only critiques the idle superfluity supposedly common among the Russian intelligentsia of the time but also instills the possibility of social change for the modern reader.

While scholars agree that Turgenev first coined the term “the superfluous man” in 1850 with his novella “The Diary of a Superfluous Man,” Judith Armstrong recognizes that Pushkin uses a form of the adjective to describe “Eugene Onegin,” his novel in verse published in serial form between 1825 and 1832 (279). “The Diary of a Superfluous Man” is written as first-person journal entries by a man who is about to die. The man reflects, “I’m superfluous and nothing more. A supernumerary, and that’s all. Nature, apparently, did not reckon on my appearance, and consequently treated me as an unexpected and uninvited guest” (15). The protagonist goes on to describe his self-defined superfluosness in more detail,

Throughout my whole life I was constantly finding my place taken...I was apprehensive, reserved, and irritable, like all sickly people. Moreover, probably owing to excessive self-consciousness, perhaps as the result of the generally unfortunate cast of my personality, there existed between my thoughts and feelings...a sort of inexplicable, irrational, and utterly insuperable battier; and whenever I made up my mind to overcome this obstacle by force, to break down this barrier, my gestures, the expression of my face, my whole being, took on an appearance of painful restraint. (16)



Turgenev's novel reveals the first direct definition of the superfluous man; a man struggling with debilitating self-doubt and fear. Extensive research of the term, however, reveals that the "superfluous man" is multifarious and often difficult to define conclusively. Gheith finds the "flexibility" of the superfluous man crucial for its "ever-widening circle of interpretation" (230). Because the superfluous man is representative of a sociopolitical moment, attitude, and culture, its manifestation is largely related to the author's or critic's personal experience of the time. Thus, the fluidity of the term reflects the "varying forms of opposition" that were developing in Russia in the 19th century (Gheith 230). Despite its malleable nature, the superfluous man can still be defined in terms of his dissatisfaction with and alienation from society. The superfluous man does not have the tools or the motivation to bring about social or political change. Thus, his life remains a tragic resignation to a static and miserable existence. In Goncharov's *Oblomov*, the protagonist of the same name struggles even to get off the couch. Goncharov writes, "lying down was not for Oblomov a necessity, as it was for a sick man or a man who is sleepy; or a matter of chance as it is for a man who is tired; or a pleasure, as it is for a lazy man: it was his normal condition" (14).

Another important aspect of the superfluous man motif is his interactions and relationships with a female character. Most often, this relationship is doomed to failure from the very beginning. In superfluous man stories, the female is set up as a moral superior and ideal for the hero. The woman's role in the superfluous man tale is debated, but she acts most often as a foil character, one created only to shed light on or develop the

superfluous man in new ways for the reader. Gheith claims that what she calls the “necessary woman,” only exists as a tool to “measure of his superfluity” in that she forces the superfluous man to make decisions and take action (232). I will return to the role of women in Russian literature, as it is a crucial part of my argument, later in this thesis.

The basic definition of the superfluous man is broad enough to cover “anyone unable to fill their social function;” it therefore exists in many forms of literature across the globe. Thus, it is important to unearth what makes this motif uniquely Russian. Gheith argues that the apathy of the superfluous man can be attributed to “Russian social and governmental structures that blocked the expression of creative, reforming energies” (230). More specifically, Armstrong points to various aspects of Russian autocracy dating from the 1820s that she sees as directly in relation to the development and growth of the superfluous man in the consciousness of young people. According to Frank Friedberg Seeley, the 18th century intelligentsia was originally “an instrument of the autocracy,” but after a collective ideological shift in the 19th century, which led to a break with governmental authority, they took on the function of “protagonist of the new order” (97). The most notable cause of the shift seems to be the reign of Nicholas I following the failed Decemberist Revolt in protest against this assumption of the throne in 1825. Nicholas I, a political conservative whose main focus was political and geographical expansion, made no real attempt to understand “the minds and hearts of the youth of his nation” (Armstrong 284). Under Nicolas I, young men with an education

felt especially removed as they understood the policies being enacted but did not envision a way to be involved in constructing change. Armstrong associates this real frustration with that of the fictionalized superfluous man, as men experienced the contradiction of “the opening of wide horizons and the slamming of the window in the faces that looked at them” (284). In his essay on the superfluous man, Seeley claims the fissure between the intelligentsia and the government was inevitable because of the Russian autocracy’s methods of use and abuse. The government hoped to utilize the minds of the intelligentsia for its own purposes of “maintaining the powers and privileges of the rulers,” while the intelligentsia sought only to communicate and shape values of the people. When their goals became at odds with those of the authorities, conflict arose (95).

A more specific examination of the policies and attitudes of the autocracy of Nicholas I is relevant in further affirming that his actions directly attributed to the prevalence of the superfluous man in Russian literature of the 19th century. Presniakov asserts that Nicholas differed from his predecessor and brother Alexander in his “singleness of purpose and iron will” (viii). He used this iron will to strengthen and circulate the ideology of his regime’s three sacred principles: orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality. With the belief in autocracy comes the connected idea that man is inherently weak and in some cases even evil, and thus needs “a strong authoritarian to rule over him” (xvi). Furthermore, Presniakov claims that while both orthodoxy and autocracy are simple to interpret, nationality was more convoluted in its usage. Under Nicholas I,

nationality was understood as merely “an appendage to autocracy”(viii) or further confirmation that the Russian people were content as subjects of their tsar and subsequently complicit with all this entails.

While attempting to reinforce Russian identity along class lines, Nicholas I also sought to centralize and standardize education. Those who belonged to the upper class were allowed the education that they “deserved.” Those in lower classes were not given the opportunity to move up in their economic position, thus making a subversive or intellectual opposition less and less a possibility (xxvii). As time progressed, Nicolas I became increasingly aggressive and paranoid, which we see reflected in his policy-making. He forbade all Russians from traveling outside the country, and censorship within the country became prevalent on a massive scale. According to Presniakov, “literature and thought were virtually stifled” under Nicholas’ rule and throughout this time “instead of winning a future, [Russians] were to defend a past.” (xxxii).

This brief historical summary helps to shed light on the origins of the superfluous man in Russian consciousness. By 1855, Russian society, in a sense, was closing in on itself. There was little opportunity for rebellion or creative outrage, even for the educated. Jesse and Betty Clardy note that the most prevalent sentiment of the superfluous man is found in his overwhelming fear of political persecution. Civilians feared a government that did not recognize their worth or even fully understand their needs. Subsequently, the creation of the superfluous man becomes a concrete example of how this fear manifests itself in daily life. Writers who utilized this motif often did so to

critique an inactive and uninspired intelligentsia. In Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin" for example, Onegin receives an education but still feels useless to society. Jesse and Betty Clardy claim in the end, Onegin's youthful energy becomes a "wilderness" as it has no purpose but to breed upon itself with no outlet (4). Similarly, in his novel *Oblomov*, published in 1859, Goncharov creates a listless and unsatisfied man, one who divides life into two categories "work and boredom" and whose daily life revolves around this boredom, leading to his subsequent inertia. Oblomov is a man of wealth used to receiving everything he desires without lifting a finger. As he is raised to place little value on being an active member of society, he eventually becomes so withdrawn that he is unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. He is a prisoner within his own walls, created by a society in which he is never expected actively to participate. As Jesse and Betty Clardy note, "his mind and will are paralyzed so that he cannot cope with...trivial matters, much less...religious persecutions...tyrannical rule...and Tsarist imperialism...all of which were plaguing his country at this time" (21). Under Nicholas I, oppressed great minds expressed their frustrations through limited fictional characters. The superfluous man reflects the increasing feelings of hopelessness and debilitation among citizens who possess social and political awareness.

In the early years of the 19th century, Russian intellectuals had an increased exposure to European romantic texts. According to Armstrong, the combination of both the feeling of "soul cring[ing]... guilt, helplessness and shame," along with the influence of the European romantic portrayal of individualistic struggles against "various forms of

doubt,” caused Russians to begin to compare themselves to the outside, more quickly advancing European world (291). Therefore, Russians did not just see themselves as alienated in their own societies but also lesser than their European competition.

Europeans associated their alienation with a disillusionment created by government control; thus the Byronic heroes of European romantic literature “romanticized their individualism” (291). In opposition, Russian literature focused more on a detachment from the self. According to Armstrong, while Russians and Europeans shared a feeling of alienation, European romantic texts highlighted the superiority of the hero, creating “wayward, headstrong, and willful characters putting up valiant and individual struggles against various forms of doubt” (291), whereas the protagonist of Russian literature dealt with a sense of inferiority, manifesting in a “disillusionment with the self” (292).

Moreover, it is crucial to note that the Russian intelligentsia did not only isolate themselves from governmental authority but also from other Russians of different socio-economic classes and ideologies. The intelligentsia saw themselves as a superior group, one enlightened to the ideals of European influence. Seeley sees this shift as entailing a “divorce from the people” and a rejection of the traditions and culture of old Russia (95). This removal is crucial to the two-fold alienation of the superfluous man. No longer identifying with their fellow citizens and unable to place their trust in the government, the intelligentsia began effectively to shrink their own world. Often times, the social conflict between the intelligentsia and the rest of society manifests itself in an unstable home environment. Seeley’s investigation into the biographies of Russian intelligentsia

exposes unhappy childhoods. Many of the Russian elite were raised by servants, either due to a loss of a parent or as a result of an indifferent parent (96). Thus, the relationships at home did not provide “the love nor the stability needed for the normal development of happy human beings” (96). The inability to connect with the outside world begins in the home, moves towards a rejection of fellow citizens along with a disassociation with the government, eventually leading to a rejection of self-worth and value.

Much occurs in the time between the reign of Nicholas I and the beginnings of Communist takeover in Russia. As the primary goal of this paper is not a historical but rather a literary argument, I hope only to address the most relevant events that link to the overall consciousness of Russian civilians. Under the government of Alexander II—1855 to 1881—there was a resurgence of civic pride. Russian Liberals began to express a desire for a “person-centered” reorientation of society (Obolonsky 67). Some of Alexander II’s policies were actively aligned with this new idea, the most crucial being his abolition of serfdom in 1861. In this time period a divide begins to form among the disempowered intelligentsia: a split took place between the liberal minded, individual-centered group and the radical, system-centered group. Thus, the liberals became at odds with the radical movement while still often grouped together in the public and political eye. According to Obolonsky, Marxist socialism stems from the radical group of intelligentsia as their movement “gave expression to traditional Russian system-centeredness dressed in a new guise but manifest in its most extreme and ruthless form” (91). In this time period, radicals began to perpetuate the idea that there was little

value in the individual, effectively challenging European thought of the time. This movement appealed to the young and semi-educated because of its sweeping statements of romance, conspiracy, and mystery as well as “the simplicity of the doctrine distinguishing ‘good’ from ‘evil’”(91). Bulgakov directly opposes this black-and-white way of seeing the world and his work serves not only to complicate it but to also dismantle it, which I will detail later in this thesis.

Under Alexander II, the Russian intelligentsia began dividing itself into competitive groups, thus becoming increasingly at odds with each other. Another example of the rejection of person-centered ideals lies in the growth of the Slavophile movement of the time. This movement pitted Slavic peoples and their accomplishments against the rest of the world, propelling an “us” versus “them” mentality, which resulted in a chauvinistic worldview. Because of his attempts at more liberal policies with a humanist focus, Alexander II was assassinated in 1881 and the liberal hopes were diminished.

After Alexander II’s assassination, the public associated the erratic behavior of the radicals with the intelligentsia as a whole. Therefore, the intelligentsia became enemies of the established government. The reign of Alexander II’s son, Alexander III, is associated with a regression to the earlier practices and ideals of Nicolas I (Obolonsky 118). As a “strong-willed conservative,” Alexander III played a large role in the growth of nationalism in 1870 (Obolonsky 118). In effect, Alexander III restored the strict social order of Nicholas I and reversed the reform that had taken place under Alexander II.



Obolonsky notes that during this time, respected writers turned to satire and irony to cope with the decline of political policy. Critical humor allowed civilians “important moral support in their efforts to survive a tragic situation and hope for a better future” (119). Aligning itself closely with satirical art, a Russian counterculture began to commit itself to the service of others to overcome the hardships stemming from Russian imperialism. But despite these efforts, the liberal intelligentsia was deeply alienated in this period, which Obolonsky sees as a “great misfortune for Russia” (126).

Under the reign of Nicholas II—1894 to 1917, however, the intelligentsia had a prominent role in developing a civic consciousness. This period brought about a rich artistic spirit, influenced by “shared communities” who “animated by the civic spirit” spent their time “consider[ing] and worry[ing] about the destiny of their country” (Obolonsky 128). Nicholas II, however, is deemed by most historians to be an inadequate ruler, one greatly susceptible to influence of others. He is often described as a man with a deep inferiority complex and an inability to make difficult decisions. Because of this, the intelligentsia’s distance from the government was understandable in the eyes of the public. Obolonsky notes that under Nicholas II, the intelligentsia, “emphasized their own autonomy” to further promote their attempt at moral reorientation. However, the radicals still remained more successful because in ways of politics, “tasks of construction are always more difficult than tasks of destruction” (153).

In the years leading up to the Russian Revolution, the intelligentsia suffered from a severe sense of anomie, which Obolonsky defines as a “loss of moral meaning.” For

the educated of the region, this resulted in a loss of “moral responsibility for the destiny of the country” (156). Thus, the Russian intelligentsia were often ostracized from political positions of power. Because the educated felt so isolated, a chauvinistic national ideology prevailed often along with irrational public policies (156). Post-revolution, despite the government’s efforts to appeal to the working class, similar symptoms originated from the discrepancies between “official” Soviet propaganda and rumor circulating throughout the country. Civilians were then left to decipher reality. Obolonsky asserts that under the Lenin regime, the intelligentsia deteriorated as a social force, which led to an even stronger sense of isolation and apathy among the educated population in Russia.

The years in which Bulgakov wrote *The Master and Margarita*—1928 to 1940—were marked by great unrest and disorientation among Soviet civilians. The most prominent cause of uncertainty was the USSR’s sudden decision to sign a pact with Germany in 1939. Up until this time, the Soviet Union made great efforts to perpetuate an anti-fascist agenda internally and nationally. According to Timothy Johnston, the exact reason for the shift in diplomatic policy is still a mystery and is often still debated (3). Johnston asserts that only weeks before the pact was signed, both Stalin and Molotov still claimed to view an alliance with Germany as an “unlikely prospect” (3). It is easy to discern how the unpredictable and at times incomprehensible decisions made by the Soviet government translated to civilian mistrust.

As noted earlier, Soviet citizens were often left to sort through the official media and word-of-mouth rumors to uncover any factual understanding of the Soviet mission. For example, five days before the USSR's pact with Germany, in August of 1939, *Pravda*—the official Russian Communist newspaper—published a piece that stated “a war of the Soviet Union against racism would be a just and legal war” (Johnston 5). Soon, the switch from an anti-fascist agenda was explained by *Pravda* as the only solution to bring about peace to the USSR. *Pravda* wrote that the agreement with Germany “reflected the long term peace policy of the Soviet Union” and “provided for good neighborly relations between the two countries” (5). The USSR, in effect, developed an entirely new diplomatic identity. Stalin, moreover, sought to rewrite and repurpose history for his own gains. In 1938, Stalin published a new official history of the Communist Party, which essentially served to rewrite the events of the Russian Revolution. Arendt argues his action was a “signal” that the “superpurge which had decimated a whole generation of Soviet intellectuals had come to an end” (342). The process of trying to decipher fact from fiction was frustrating and arguably futile as aspects of the Soviet's role on the world stage continued to be shrouded in mystery.

Alongside the unpredictability of the government was the Soviet regime's efforts increasingly to isolate itself from the Western world. In the initial years of Stalin's rule, the USSR positioned itself as a socialist haven surrounded by its capitalist enemies. Within this morally righteous frame, the official Soviet agenda worked to eliminate all aspects of Western influence. According to Johnston, imports of technology from the

outside world were “sharply curtailed” after 1932. In 1934 the 17th Party of Congress publicly announced that domestic technology would soon heighten the USSR’s status on the global stage. When foreign technological advancements were covered in the official press, most often the information focused on Soviet competition with and victory over the rest of the world (18). Art and other forms of foreign media were also suppressed. No foreign films were screened in the Soviet Union during this period. Jazz music was permitted only if the musician was a Soviet citizen and incorporated his own Soviet twist on the composition.

Another facet of Soviet daily life that perpetuated fear and isolation was the continuous threat of impending war. While the official Soviet press highlighted the USSR’s role as peacemaker among its fellow nations, most civilians understood that under the tense circumstances, war was inevitable. Johnston claims, “civilians routinely interpreted domestic and international events as harbingers of war” (42). Moreover, the war rumors were so persistent that civilians began to plan and act preemptively by stocking their homes with an excess of grocery items and household needs. To complicate things further, the pervading rumors communicated conflicting information which varied as to who the actual enemy was and who allies would be. This fear and skepticism of the government, along with the sense of anomie which was carried over from earlier periods and heightened throughout this period, led to a growing despondency among the Russian intelligentsia. Johnston notes that as the gap between official information expressed by the government and the unofficial information circulating within the country expanded,

individuals developed a more cynical and negative view of both international affairs as well as of the official press. Cynicism did not often lead to political action, however. Instead the negativity festered in Soviet minds along with an inescapable anxiety of imminent doom.

Armstrong argues that the superfluous man originates in the early 19th century as a “man born from social experience, out of elective unemployment, frustration, and rejection of the official world” (16). As noted, throughout Russian history, the sense of agency among middle and upper class intelligentsia has fluctuated. There are certainly periods in which the intelligentsia felt empowered by and involved with government aims. However, throughout the Soviet-era we see a significant heightening of dissatisfaction among the intelligentsia, which is reflected in the literature of the time, and certainly presents itself in *The Master and Margarita*. Mikhail Bulgakov continues to utilize the superfluous man to critique Russian society. While he repurposed the superfluous man tradition of his predecessors, he manipulated the motif so it would remain relevant and continue to develop throughout the Soviet-era.

Mikhail Bulgakov’s biography produces further insight into his personal connection with superfluity. After he abandoned his career in medicine, Bulgakov pursued his literary endeavors quite late in life. He was thus often seen by critics as a ‘yesterday’s man’ who had no place in post-revolutionary society. Most of Bulgakov’s work went unrecognized and unpublished until after his death in 1940. His literary resurgence began in 1955 as his work was sought after and respected by the public and

critics alike. The complete and full publication of *The Master and Margarita* in Russia did not come until 1973 (Milne 1). Writing under the rule of Stalin's regime, Bulgakov's works were the antithesis of what was then accepted and expected from a Russian creative voice. The government sought to standardize and industrialize through censorship, which left no place for Bulgakov's heavy irony and satire. Interestingly, reception from the outside world reflected the opposite. Milne notes that Western scholarship "appreciated and interpreted Russian humor chiefly as a critique...of the Soviet regime," therefore satire was a higher form of humor and Russian artists who attempted humor that did not aspire to be satire was "devalued as empty" (3). According to Stenbock-Fermor, Bulgakov's satire was regularly aimed at "the transformation of members of the writers' profession" who "in former days...[were] always ready to challenge the administration" but now were "hired employees of an agency created by a new administration...who were rewarded and punished...according to special standards" (316). Bulgakov was disappointed in the changes occurring around him, an attitude recognized by those who were close to him. Anna Akhmatova, a poet and close friend to Bulgakov, wrote a poem memorializing him after his death in which she writes, "You drank wine, and told the wittiest jokes, and/suffocated inside stifling walls" (Akhmatova 93). Bulgakov was an educated and innovative man with no public outlet for his expression. Akhmatova concludes, "who only yesterday it/seems, chatted with me, hiding the tremor of his mortal pain" (93). Akhmatova's piece reveals a side of Bulgakov beneath the whimsy found in his work, a side only revealed to a close few.

Despite having attributes similar to those of the superfluous man, Bulgakov made efforts to express his creative and political ideas. Between the years of 1930 and 1939 he wrote three letters to Stalin directly, asking for permission to attain a visa to travel abroad and requesting for the release of his friend, dramatist Nikolay Erdman who was sentenced to a three year period of internal exile (Milne 189). None of his letters received a reply, and he was never granted a visa to travel abroad as he desired. Moreover, as time progressed, Bulgakov's plays continued to be rejected by the Moscow Arts Theater, eventually provoking Bulgakov to write a letter to the Soviet government which "infers that there is genuinely no place for him in Soviet culture" and concludes he and his wife should be allowed to leave the country as the "only humane solution" (Curtis 73). In this letter, Bulgakov writes, "since I no longer have the strength to survive, since I am persecuted and know that it is impossible that I shall ever be published or staged within the USSR again, and since I am close to suffering a nervous breakdown, I am turning to you to request you to... EXPEL ME FROM THE USSR" (Curtis 95). Nonetheless, Bulgakov strove to find humor in his oppression. A friend, Konstantin Paustovsky, noted in his memoirs that Bulgakov would often pretend to write Stalin "long, enigmatic letters" and sign them "Tarzan" (Milne 190). We see similar antics and opposition to power throughout his works of fiction.

The relationship between Bulgakov and Stalin was a complex one. While at times, Stalin seemed to be a fan of his work—it is rumored he saw Bulgakov's play *The Days of Turbins* more than 15 times—Stalin was often personally involved with the

decision to censor much of Bulgakov's other works. Moreover, Stalin's interpretation of *The Days of Turbins* reveals he spun the overall message to be appealing to the Revolutionary cause. Stalin wrote the *The Days of Turbins* was a "work demonstrating the overwhelming strength of Bolshevism" (Curtis 70). Bulgakov believed that Stalin respected him more for his honesty and his lack of attempt to "appear pro-Bolshevik," which helps to explain why he continued to write to Stalin directly. In 1930, Stalin called Bulgakov directly. He asked Bulgakov where he would want to work implying he could arrange for him a nice position. Stalin then suggested that they meet sometime and have a talk. Bulgakov eagerly accepted, although he was never given a meeting. Curtis notes that Bulgakov's attitude towards Stalin was "politically naive" but very human. Stalin was a master of manipulation and "excelled at playing a kind of cat-and-mouse game with leading cultural figures, which meant they became drawn into a kind of horrified, yet fascinated, relationship with him" (112). It seems Bulgakov was not immune to Stalin's tricks, and the two remained intertwined in a complicated relationship.

Critics of *The Master and Margarita* have focused much attention on the structure of the novel, especially on Bulgakov's decision to feature a story of present-day Soviet life alongside the biblical story of the death of Pontius Pilate. W. J. Leatherbarrow points to a parallel between Yeshua and the Master as both idealists and visionaries who "quietly engage in the task of imagining alternative realities" (31). Leatherbarrow touches on our ability to condemn both men for their acts of "cowardice," which he defines as



inconsistencies of private thoughts and public behavior. While I do not believe he places enough weight on the lack of drive within the two men to find fulfillment and spread their ideas, I do value Leatherbarrow's insight and commentary regarding Bulgakov's discussion of artistic vision, as he claims that within the novel "the artist is the voice of restlessness...he is manifestly out of place in a world of mediocrity, complacency, and spiritual atrophy" (36). Leatherbarrow's definition of the artist aligns closely with that of the superfluous man, the main difference stemming from the superfluous man's inability to believe in the importance of his own work and his own voice.

Jessica E. Merrill also focuses on the two plot lines of Bulgakov's work. She interprets the work as divided into two narrators, one for the Moscow plot and one for the Jerusalem plot. The Moscow narrator, according to Merrill, uses colloquial expressions to parody a gossip-style of communication, whereas the narrator of the Jerusalem plot leans toward a more "realistic and cinematic style" (297). I find this relevant as it relates to the two forms of information that Russian civilians were often ingesting: the official state press and the word-of-mouth rumor that was heavily circulating in the Soviet period. Merrill's argument highlights Bulgakov's effort to mirror the disorientation that comes from receiving information from two vastly different mediums and historical periods. Merrill writes that the reader is expected to recognize the naiveté of, and in effect look down upon the Moscow narrator, but she notes there is also a sense of anxiety: while you are laughing at the narrator, "there may be someone... looking down, laughing, at you" (304). This anxiety, experienced by fictional character

and reader alike, I believe assists to instill a fear and loss of purpose crucial to the superfluous man identity.

In his biography of Bulgakov, Leslie Milne stresses the satirical nature of *The Master and Margarita*, claiming that Woland's character as the "foreign observer" is ideal for such commentary. Milne writes that in the Soviet period, the official ideology of "military atheism and obligatory historical optimism" proclaimed the truth and triumph of "all that was new revolutionary and good" (256). This point sheds light on the role of religion in the text, and highlights its prominence as subversive at the time of writing. Milne also notes that Margarita's eventual flight in the second half of the novel relates to Bulgakov's experience as an "author imprisoned within the geopolitical constraints of the Soviet Union" (250). Bulgakov then, uses his invented characters as a form of escape, a point with which I wholeheartedly agree, and will expand upon in detail in the next section.

In *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov combines multiple genres in order to dismantle traditional norms of Russian literature. Within the novel, one finds aspects of historical fiction, folklore, and magical realism. The combination of multiple genres serve to complicate the character development and satirize established ways of Russian storytelling. Maria Kisel argues that the supernatural themes within *The Master and the Margarita* represent a longing for a pre-revolutionary, Western-influenced Russian culture. According to Kisel, this contrast of the supernatural world, one that allows Margarita great freedom, with the "real world" of Moscow "may be a metaphorical

device acknowledging the extreme historical and cultural isolation of the Soviet state” (592).

Just as the superfluous man is a distinctly Russian literary motif, the inclusion of supernatural themes by means of magic and folktales is also a natively Russian tradition. While the superfluous man’s origins lie in the 19th century, folklore in Russian culture dates back far earlier with the oral tales of the peasantry. Russian folktales were often told by men to large groups for entertainment and as a connection to the spiritual world. It was believed that spirits of all kinds would be attracted by the tales and would take part in listening. According to scholar Robert Chandler, magical tales in Russia often included a quest and an initiation or interaction with a supernatural creature or animal (x). Chandler claims the interaction between creature and human relates to the intermediary role of the shaman who calls on his spirit helpers. Bulgakov’s interaction with shamanism in his portrayal of Margarita is expanded later in this thesis. In the Soviet-era, there was revival of folklore in which writers were conceiving new stories and interacting with stories of the past in current texts (xvi). Chandler points us to Carl Jung’s belief that folktales are “illustrations of universal patterns of psychological maturation” and obstacles to its attainment (xvi). Furthermore, traditional folktales do not expand much on the psychological experience of hero or heroine and thus allow for readers of all kinds to find meaning in the story. Thus, the universality of the tale is crucial in keeping the tale relevant and accessible to all audiences. I find this interesting when examining Margarita’s lack of psychological development as it relates to magic and

folktales. Through this lens, her lack of development can be seen less as a sexist misstep and more of an active choice tied to the folklore tradition. According to Leslie Milne, secular satires in Russia, first appearing in the 17th and 18th centuries, “gave expression to popular grievances and attitudes, and with their roots in oral tradition...marked the moment when Russian folklore took on permanent form for the first time” (2). Because of this connection between folklore and satire, Margarita’s transcendence thus represents a universal escape for the oppressed Soviet-era civilian.

*The Master and Margarita* also incorporates aspects of the genre magical realism. Peter Arnds argues that the “unreality” surrounding totalitarian regimes may “be the reason why some artists respond to [Soviet life] with works of magical realism” (73). Bulgakov hides his commentary on the Soviet regime beneath themes of witchcraft and the supernatural due to his fear of persecution. By juxtaposing magical and supernatural elements with that of the realities of totalitarianism, Bulgakov is able to satirize the injustices that citizens faced under Stalin’s rule. Arnds points out that when faced with heavy censorship, metaphorical language was often the only option for Soviet era artists. Thus, “the magical realist novel can be a tool to express and attack the politics of totalitarian regimes” (74). This tool is then used to perpetuate the conversation between the rational and irrational. Woland and his cronies serve to show that when examined from a different perspective, totalitarianism is just as terrifying and confounding as witchcraft.

Examining the tradition of Russian literature through a feminist lens gets a bit more complicated. Russian literature has a much newer tradition than the traditions of European countries such as Britain or France. Thus, feminist criticism too, is a relatively new field within the context of Russian literature. Western implications of feminism should not be the sole lens for interpreting the work since Russian women have conflicting perceptions of the term. Many Russian women reject Western feminism in its entirety as an alien ideology and embrace traditional values in a nationalistic effort to remain as Russian as possible. In her essay on feminist criticism in a Russian context, Irinia Savkina claims this rejection stems from “the elevation of the concept of a special kind of Russian soulfulness in counterweight to a ‘soulless,’ technogenic Western culture” (41). Moreover, Russians also associate Western feminism with Marxism and a mentality of “been there done that” (Savkina 44). Similarly, problems arise when working with a Russian text in translation. One must recognize that within a translated text the authorship is one of multiple, often transcultural influences, and therefore not always an accurate representation of the Russian experience (Savkina 50). Savkina claims many Western concepts simply fail to have a Russian correlate, and therefore fall flat with Russian academics. Further problems arise in the differing conceptions of maleness and femaleness between Russia and the West. Elena Baraban, for example, believes the “strong” heroine in Russian novels has been “underappreciated” by feminist criticism in the West. According to Baraban, “within the framework of the feminist conception of personality, certain forms of female activity, which do not correspond to

strength of spirit, are hailed in the female characters of Russian literature” (Savkina 55). Thus, what the Western feminist movement perceives as agency may vastly differ from the Russian interpretation.

As noted earlier, Gheith asserts that no superfluous man is complete without an unsuccessful relationship to a woman. Often, his love is “predicated on failure” and the heroine only functions as “a foil” to the superfluous man (229). Furthermore, Gheith argues the superfluous man’s existence and popularity has a leveling effect in gender relations. She believes the popularity of the motif expresses the idea that “in autocratic Russia, men experienced the same deep sense of powerlessness encountered by women of many cultures” (243). She goes on to clarify the fact that that despite this commonality, it cannot be ignored that men in Russia still had much more privilege and power than women. The majority of Russian literature recognized and canonized from Russia is written by men and thus men have the authoritative voice and power to tell their story which most often their women counterparts do not.

Elizabeth Klotsty Beaujour asserts that Bulgakov’s novel asks us to go beyond the image of “wicked, snaggletoothed witch.” Margarita, in the devil’s hands, becomes “a comforter and healer...a source of mercy” (73). This inevitable tie to the devil, embodied in the man Woland, is what Rosalind Marsh finds so frustrating in her feminist critique of Margarita. Marsh argues that a crucial irksome patriarchal feature of Russian literature is that most “sympathetic” female characters are young and beautiful. Margarita, according to Marsh, is “sexy and forgiving,” and ultimately her character remains under the thumb

of the devil, a man far more powerful than she is (73). I tend to agree with Marsh as I find it difficult to ignore Margarita's ultimate ties to her male counterparts in the text. In addition, Bulgakov allows us little insight into the emotional and complex inner workings of Margarita's character. What we do know of her motivations is limited to her desire to find the Master and be his muse.

Much like the superfluous man, the supernatural woman also has origins in the political history of Russia. When examined more closely, one sees that Margarita is a metaphor for the perception and oppression of Russian women in the Soviet-era. The USSR was one of the first governments to include equality of the sexes in their constitution. However, this act, while revolutionary, did not reflect the actual attitudes toward women of the period. While women were given the "right to work," this right more often than not forced women into a double burden. Women were expected actively to participate in the economy while also continuing to take care of all the domestic needs of the family. Genia K. Browning notes that "the lived reality of Soviet women serves to contradict much of the official claims about women's lives" (1) and that the oppression of women is often "internalized and perceived through male definitions of reality" (9).

Margarita then, as a woman defined by Bulgakov, is a representation of this pseudo-empowerment. At first glance, she is an active agent, but her power still stems from male influence and ultimately from the imagined world of a man's mind. In *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov synthesizes literary traditions of the past (via the superfluous man and folklore) with current traditions (supernatural and extraordinary) to

point us towards the future. In this sense, his work serves to show us of what the imagination is capable. In conversation with the superfluous man, Margarita has an interesting role. As a supernatural woman, Margarita is both within and without the tradition of this motif. The liminal nature of her character functions to express a new hope for the people of Russia, one with an active power to step outside of reality and outside of government control. However, because his text ultimately has ties to patriarchy and male definitions it is important to branch out further to unearth the female experience. In my conclusion, I will examine the works of two female authors, Teffi—pseudonym of Nadezhda Alexandrovna Lokhvitskaya, who was writing at the same time as Bulgakov, and Tatyana Tolstaya who wrote after him; both women take inspiration from Bulgakov and use aspects of both the folktale tradition and magical realism to imagine different worlds and create female characters with active agency.



## CHAPTER TWO: THE SUPERFLUOUS MEN IN *THE MASTER AND MARGARITA*

### The Master as Superfluous

One finds countless and varying representations of the superfluous man motif within the text of *The Master and Margarita*. I believe it crucial to examine first the Master himself. The Master's character is first introduced in the chapter titled "Enter the Hero" residing within the insane asylum where Ivan has been admitted. As his character is developed further the reader is left to question the validity of the chapter's title, who is the real hero of this tale? Bulgakov takes no pains to hide the superfluous nature of the Master—he is not given a name and insists on anonymity in conversation with Ivan. When Ivan asks for an introduction the Master replies despondently, "I no longer have a name...I gave it up, just as I've given up everything else in life" (114). It is later revealed that his nickname "the Master" was given to him by Margarita. Margarita can thus be attributed to a partial creation of his identity. Moreover, Bulgakov does not offer even the reader insight into the Master's identity prior to his relationship with Margarita. All clues to his psyche originate from his initial meeting and eventual loss of Margarita. Despite his lack of psychological development and his current pathetic state, the Master is highly educated. He is a historian and translator, fluent in five languages besides Russian. Although he is highly intelligent, the Master lacks the social skills necessary to

function properly in society. As is common in the superfluous man, the Master lives a “solitary life” without family or significant friendships in Moscow (114).

At the core of the Master’s disillusionment is an insecurity about his own literary talent and a subsequent lack of belief in his political agency. He does not believe that he can effectively change his current situation or his role in society. When Ivan suggests he and the Master hinder the Devil’s plans for further possible mischief around Moscow, the Master states, “you already tried and look where it got you...I wouldn't advise others to try it either” (114). The Master is earnest in his cynicism, reflecting the hopeless attitudes of the citizens in Soviet society. Civilians lacked motivation and the belief they could impact change thus they submitted to the harsh realities of communal flats and food shortages.

The relationship between the Master’s misfortune and the plight of citizens in Communist Russia is also seen when the Master’s book is collectively rejected by critics. In his decision to write the story of Pontius Pilate, a religious figure, the Master is at odds with the strictly atheist society. While working with an editor, the Master faces severe scrutiny over his choice of topic. Instead of developing a conversation around the manuscript, the editor embarks on a personal attack on the Master; he asks the Master who he is, where he comes from, and how he could even consider the topic. The Master battles societal norms that place a higher value on secular artistic endeavors. The Master’s adult identity is tied to both the process of writing the story of Pontius Pilate and Margarita’s belief in his great genius. Therefore, the expectations for his novel are

monumental. Upon its rejection by multiple critics and the complete lack of recognition by the public, his identity faces a similar rejection.

After hearing of the negative reception of his novel, the Master goes through phases of emotion to come to terms with it. First, the Master feels amusement, which is most likely a defense mechanism to avoid acknowledgement. He then begins to feel amazement at the critics “uncommonly fake and uncertain” tone. He goes on to state, “I couldn't rid myself of the thought that the authors of these articles weren't saying what they wanted to say, and that was why they were so furious” (121). Here, the Master feels the paranoia of possible censorship, a common fear among distrusting Russians in the Soviet-era. The Master questions whether the critics are fully believing what they are writing or are in fact under societal influence to feel and express themselves a certain way.

The discord between the religious themes presented in the Master's novel and the harsh atheism of the modern society seems to be a prominent reason for the book's failure, and consequently, for the Master's increased reclusive attitudes to his surroundings. In light of this, the apparent melodrama of the Master's decision to burn his own manuscript is less ridiculous. By burning the manuscript, the superfluous man lashes out in the only way he knows how, against himself. The burning scene is filled with violent and emotional language; the Master breaks his nails “tearing the notebook apart,” he “jab[s]” at the pages with a poker, and then “beat[s]” the ashes “viciously” (122). Margarita's reaction, in turn, is more restrained. After she “bare[s] her

teeth in fury,” she purses her lips, gains control over her anger, and begins “gathering and sorting the burnt pages.” She then “stacked the pages neatly, wrapped them in paper and tied them with a ribbon” (123). Margarita provides the stability that the Master desperately lacks. Upon concluding his story to Ivan, the Master states “one really shouldn’t make big plans for oneself, dear neighbor...I wanted to travel around the globe. Well, it turned out that wasn't meant to be. I can only see an insignificant little piece of it” (125). The Master articulates another conflict civilians faced under Stalin and mirrors Bulgakov’s own desire to travel abroad and inability to do so.

#### Pontius Pilate as Superfluous

The second protagonist of the novel, Pontius Pilate, also struggles with superfluity, both internally and as a member of society. Pontius Pilate, the procurator of Judea under Augustus Caesar as well as the hero of the Masters’ novel, represents the presence of a superfluous man in an earlier historical period. When the reader is first introduced to Pilate, he is overwhelmed with a feeling of repulsion at a permeating scent of rose oil. As the scene progresses, the scent represents a much larger inner turmoil within the procurator, Bulgakov writes, “everything now pointed to a bad day, since the smell had been pursuing him since dawn” (13). Pilate goes on to describe the scent as “hellish” and then calls upon the gods to question why he is receiving such punishment. The whole scene is quite comical, as this man, we discover in the following pages, holds prestigious power. His moaning and complaining, while internal, allow great insight into Pilate’s insecurities and the pathetic nature of his character.

Despite Pilate's attempts to intimidate Yeshua throughout the interrogation—at one point referring to himself as “a savage”—the reader is aware of Pilate's private debilitating emotional and physical discomfort. Pilate is afraid to move his head due to a “sear[ing]...hellish pain” and at one point is overcome by an “agonizing wave of nausea” (17). Throughout their conversation, Pilate has recurrent looming thoughts of his own death. He hopes for poisonous relief, and in turn questions the working order of his own brain. While it is unclear where Pilate's ailments stem from, the symptoms operate towards a hopeless and cynical mentality similar to that of the Master and other superfluous men before him. Pilate's struggle presents an interesting conversation between public appearance and private pain. Those in power are often expected to put forth certain illusions to appear stronger than the average person. Bulgakov points to the hypocrisy of leaders viewed as gods. He writes, “The procurator felt the urge to get up, put his temple under the water, and freeze in that position. But he knew that even that would not help him” (15). There are specific actions Pilate is aware of that he can take to alleviate his palpable discomfort. But without even attempting these actions he resigns himself to the idea that any attempt would be futile. He remains static, thus alluding that his problems go much deeper than the physical and, subsequently are much more difficult to address and properly heal.

The procurator's superfluous nature is manifested in his inability to comprehend or acknowledge the importance of truth. In conversation with the philosophizing Yeshua, he asks, “why did you, a vagrant, stir up the crowds in the marketplace by talking about

truth, when you have no conception; of what it is? What is truth?" (17). Pilate's question reveals his own lack of conception, he projects his lack of knowledge onto a man less powerful than he. Yeshua proves his intuitive and intelligent nature with his response. He comments on Pilate's headache and his desire to be near his dog, both of which were not spoken aloud but were gathered by Yeshua through perceptive observations. Yeshua shifts the dynamics of power by bringing attention to Pilate's isolation, claiming he has "lost all faith in people" and because of this, his life is "impoverished" (18). Yeshua angers Pilate further when he points to Pilate's misconception of good and evil. He claims there are no evil people in the world to which Pilate retorts, "This is the first time I have heard that!" (20). Pilate lingers with the topic, asking his secretary to stop recording the conversation. It seems that despite his initial emotional reaction, he finds some interest in Yeshua's ideas and slyly slips in various follow-up questions to attain more answers.

It is after this conversation that Pilate seems to soften to Yeshua and he begins to plan ways to set Yeshua free. However, the conversation takes a turn when Yeshua reveals he is against Caesar's rule. Pilate's demeanor changes drastically, he begins speaking in a "choked and angry voice" and a "diabolical spark flashed in his eyes" (22). In fact, in any instance where Pilate must talk about or with someone who holds higher power than he does, his fear shines forth. It is clear that Pilate strictly adheres to a social and political hierarchy to stand in and compensate for his lack of any conception of truth. Hierarchy and social strata are his truth. Once Pilate discovers that the High Priest and

others of higher prestige than he believe Yeshua should die, Pilate is able quickly to ignore his newly developed soft spot. The tipping point for Pilate's decision comes when Yeshua comments on such power dynamics. Yeshua states, "every kind of power is a form of violence against people and there will come a time when neither the power of the Caesars, nor any other kind of power will exist. Man will enter the kingdom of truth and justice, where no such power will be necessary" (22). Pilate's voice is then described as "broken and ailing" and for reasons unclear he looks at the others gathered in the room with hatred, eventually shouting "It [the kingdom of truth] will never come!" (23).

Pilate's superfluous attitude and fear of those more powerful than he is embodied fully in his conversation with the High Priest. Pilate does not agree with the decision to set Bar-rabban free and to kill Yeshua. He makes known his opinion and carefully argues that perhaps a mistake has been made. When the High Priest rejects his argument, Pilate's internal dialogue reveals that his intentions for saving Yeshua have been self-motivated. Pilate suspects Yeshua can cure his headaches, although Yeshua had already told him multiple times that he is not a doctor. Pilate is saddened that Yeshua will be killed before curing him and thinks, "there will be no remedy for them [the headaches], except death" (26). He is filled with anguish both mentally and physically but instead of fighting for what he wants, he simply replies "So be it" (26). Pilate is disappointed in his own weakness and is overcome with a "rage of powerlessness," a rage that "choked and burned him" (27). Although a verbal argument ensues, with both men baring teeth, Pilate still does as the High Priest wishes. He audibly confirms, albeit "solemnly and dryly," the

death of Yeshua to all that have gathered. After his announcement, the group descends the staircase “between the walls of roses that exuded an overpowering scent” (29). The roses, then, mock Pilate’s weakness as yet another thing that he finds detestable but can do nothing about. At the end of the scene, Pilate is described gripping a “superfluous clasp” in his fist and squinting not because of the sun but because he “did not want to see the condemned men” (29). Pilate is unable to enact his agency and thus life goes on before him as if he weren't even a part of it at all.



CHAPTER THREE: SUPERNATURAL WOMAN, SUBVERTING THE  
SUPERFLUOUS MAN

Woland as Chaotic Figure

As the detail above shows, both Pilate and the Master are versions of the superfluous man. Bulgakov creates the character of Woland to complicate the standard plot lines and plights of superfluous men. Woland does not possess any superfluous characteristics; he does not feel suppressed or condemned by society. Instead, he acts as a chaotic figure in the novel, remaining outside of any logical or practical understanding. The chaos that Woland brings, then, helps to level the playing field by shifting and destroying all previous notions of hierarchical power. Woland, understood to be the devil and practicing in black magic, is present throughout the novel, interwoven in the Soviet Moscow plot. While many scenes in the novel involve Woland and deserve close attention, I plan to unpack his role in tampering with Soviet money and foreign currency as well as his interactions with the cousin of the deceased Berlioz, Maximilian Andreyevich Poplavsky as two pervasive examples of his role in dismantling societal norms. In Woland, Bulgakov is able to complicate the notion of superfluous men and the standard plot trajectory of the Russian literary tradition.

In an effort to destabilize the lives of Moscow civilians, Woland manipulates Russian and foreign currency. In his performance at the Variety Theater, for example, money bills begin to rain down on the audience under Woland's direction. Bulgakov describes the scene, "first merriment and then astonishment swept the theater" as people began "crawling in the aisles..trying to catch the capriciously twirling bills" (103). Woland's black magic serves to unearth the universal vice of greed among every citizen present. Everyone in attendance receives an equal opportunity to collect and reap the benefits of the performance. As the novel progresses, however, the currency begins to cause problems. Service workers are negatively affected by the black magic ten-ruble bills, as citizens attempt to pay with them, the money transforms into labels from various beverages, from mineral water to champagne. Bulgakov exposes the abstract and absurd nature on placement of value on pieces of paper. In effect, if all rubles turn to beverage labels, we are left to wonder, can the monetary value thus shift to something that is currently perceived as trash? Class and wealth are also dismantled with Woland's meddling. When the ten-ruble notes lose their value, all social classes are affected. Cab drivers and bartenders, yes, but also men of high-esteem and education such as the liver expert, Dr. Kuzmin. Poplavsky pays the doctor thirty rubles which are soon magically replaced by "three Abrau-Dyurso champagne labels" (179). Champagne labels represent a product of higher value than the mineral water labels the cab driver received, but fundamentally they still represent the same thing, worthless garbage. Thus, all levels of society are left feeling slighted, wronged, and confused.

Woland disassembles the previous institutionalized logic of Russian society in his involvement with foreign currencies. Accusations of holding foreign currency are persistent throughout the novel. Woland frames various individuals with packages full of foreign currencies, often individuals who hold positions of power and have great wealth, leaving citizens who once felt control over their lives with a sense of powerlessness. Even men who were active agents in society begin to feel superfluous. An example of this in the text is found in Bulgakov's description of Nikanor Ivanovich's dream. Ivanovich is the chairman of the house committee once chaired by Berlioz and taken over by Woland. Previously in the novel, Ivanovich is framed by Woland with foreign currency and transported to a clinic for observation. When asked where he attained the funds, he replies, "I never touched any foreign currency!... The Lord is punishing me for my sins" (133). He is manic in his refusal of guilt, even offering to "eat the floor" to prove he did not take any foreign money (133).

Once Ivanovich finally drifts off to sleep, he dreams he is inside a theater, a part of a large audience of men. There is a man onstage whose purpose is to coerce a confession from the men who he suspects all hold foreign currency. In the dream, Ivanovich, a respectable man in his real life, is forced to sit on the floor and is shamed in front of a large group of people. Set outside of reality, Ivanovich loses some of the privilege and power he has come to rely on in the real world. He and the MC are then entangled in an argument where he must defend the nonsensical and make a case for the existence of magic. He explains to his interrogator that "an evil power" had planted the

money in his home. In turn, the “audience roared in disapproval” (136). The dream MC is skeptical and goes onto express the unlikeliness of someone framing another with foreign currency, offering “babies,” “anonymous letters,” and “time bombs” as alternative, more realistic examples of things that are often planted on someone (136). The absurdity of this dream argument helps to illustrate Woland’s role in the text. Much like within Ivanovich’s dream, in Woland’s world, there is no place for logic. His magical tampering with money, something crucial to societal gain and power, creates a space where practical reasoning cannot solve every problem. More importantly, the amount of money or prestige one possesses does not protect anyone from Woland’s interference. In such chaos, the superfluous man effectively ceases to exist, or in another sense, exists collectively in all citizens as no one in Moscow holds the supernatural knowledge to understand and act efficiently in Woland’s world.

The illogical nature of Woland’s world is precisely what Maximilian Poplavsky fails to understand. Upon receiving a nonsensical telegram that reads, “I have just been cut in half by a streetcar at Patriarch’s. Funeral Friday 3 PM. Come. Berlioz” from his possibly deceased cousin, Poplavsky attempts to interpret a rational explanation (165). The narrator interrupts the narrative to muse, “But what are smart people for, if not to untangle tangled things?” before Poplavsky toys with multiple possible explanations for receiving this telegram, all of which are practically deduced. It is soon revealed that Poplavsky holds no affection for Berlioz and actually hopes for the death of his cousin for his own selfish intention to inherit his cousin’s apartment to move to Moscow (166).

As an economic planner, Poplavsky is likely middle class or above and most likely used to getting things that he wants. However, Woland's involvement muddies the waters, complicating what normally would have been a straight-forward process. Upon entering the apartment left by his deceased cousin, Poplavsky encounters a member of Woland's crew Korovyov. Korovyov is terribly upset over the loss of Berlioz and can barely hold a conversation, as he comes in and out of exaggerated weeping (167). The juxtaposition of the emotion of a man who does not even know Berlioz with the stoicism of Berlioz's own cousin exposes Poplavsky's heartlessness. At one point, failing to realize the irony of his own actions, Poplavsky feels "genuinely struck by the stranger's behavior" and thinks to himself, "And they say people aren't sensitive nowadays!" before his own eyes begin to tear up slightly (168).

This is the only moment of humanity we see out of Poplavsky in the novel, and Woland acts effectively to dismantle his selfish and rapacious nature. When Poplavsky attempts to discuss the apartment, Korovyov relays his questions to the black cat in the corner. Poplavsky must then conduct his serious business related conversation with a very stern cat, Behemoth. The absurdity of the situation causes Poplavsky to have a physical reaction. His "head started spinning" and "his arms and legs became paralyzed" (168). Instantly, aspects of any power he had coming into the conversation disappear. Poplavsky's internal suffering is reminiscent of Pilate's own physical pain and discomfort when faced with difficult conversations. The cat is comically shrewd and authoritative. Taking on the role of a dictator, he snaps, "Passport!" to which Poplavsky

can do nothing else but give over his passport with a “trembling hand” while wondering if he will faint (168). The cat proceeds to question his passport claiming the department he received it from “give[s] passports to anyone who walks in” and then goes on to state, “one look at you and I’d refuse you on the spot!” (169). Behemoth gives no reasoning or explanation for his suspicion, eerily harkening to the Soviet government’s fear of the foreign and the many nationalistic tendencies of the time. With power, no explanation for dismissal is required. Here, a cat holds the power and thus the cat does not need to provide explanation for his decisions. Poplavsky accepts his new role in society as superfluous. When ironically asked if “everything is completely clear?” Poplavsky can only nod.

This interaction between human and animal harkens back to Bulgakov’s conversation with the Russian folklore tradition. In his *Anthology of Russian Folklore*, Alex E. Alexander claims a common attribute of Russian folklore was an animal character portraying human attributes. Alexander writes, “wolves, foxes, cranes, and other creatures talk, argue, and intrigue much in the manner of humans” (130). Furthermore, Alexander notes that the encounter between human and animal “resolve into sharp and witty exchanges from which the tale derives much of his humor, for this art form uses animal surrogates to expose and mock the vices and false virtues of the man’s world” (130). Thus, Bulgakov uses Behemoth as a vehicle for his satirical goals to destroy social hierarchies.

Woland too, as an agent of supernatural chaos, also eliminates societal hierarchies. Woland and the rest of his crew hold the power, and Moscow citizens are left feeling vulnerable, and in effect, superfluous. Unlike the other male representations in the text, Woland is operates outside of a traditional Soviet society, and the rules and limitations associated with this society simply do not apply to him.

I now hope to focus on the second half of the novel, the half in which Woland's characterization is complicated by the introduction of Margarita. Without Margarita, Woland, as the devil, would seem cruel. I believe that the relationship between Woland and Margarita is unique and complex especially when juxtaposed with other Russian novels written before Bulgakov. The supernatural abilities Woland gives to Margarita allow her to transcend her initial superfluous nature and challenge her perceived fate. Margarita then too can operate outside of the logical world. In a supernatural realm she is powerful and strong in ways that the people of Moscow are not.

#### Margarita as Supernatural Woman

When the Master first describes Margarita to Ivan in the insane asylum, she is depicted in accordance with many superfluous qualities. Margarita is clearly unhappy with her life. When the Master first encounters her on a side street off Tverskaya, she gives him a look that is “not merely anxious, but even pained” with lonely eyes (115). Margarita is beautiful, educated, and wealthy. She is married to an “outstanding specialist” who is described as “young, handsome, kind, and honest.” On top of this it is noted that her husband “adored” her (185). Despite her marriage to a pleasing man of a

respectable class, Margarita is not satisfied. The narrator bemoans her dismay, “Gods, my gods! What did this woman want? What did this woman want, whose eyes always burn with an incomprehensible fire!” (185). The reader is able to discern that much of Margarita’s ennui can be attributed to her loss of a great love. She feels powerless without the Master in her life. In Margarita’s mind, there is nothing she can do to be with him again, and thus she chastises herself for wasting her life. She asks herself, “Why am I sitting here alone...like an owl? Why am I cut off from my life?” Margarita is superfluous in her devotion to and obsession with the Master and in her lack of agency towards making changes in her life to achieve fulfillment from other sources.

Although Margarita is initially characterized as static and disengaged, she also displays rare moments of great fire and passion. These moments help to establish Margarita as a character willing to step outside of her superfluity. While mourning the loss of the Master, Margarita feels hopeless and depressed. One particular morning, however, she is sanguine and refreshed upon waking from what she feels is a premonition that the Master is safe and alive. On this morning, she longs to “nurture” the premonition with hopes that it will “take root in her soul” (186). Bulgakov chooses desolate and sparse language to describe Margarita’s dream. Margarita is surrounded by “dismal, scrubby, half-bare trees” near a “rough bridge” and “swollen stream.” Moreover, there was “not a breath of wind, not a cloud moving, not a living soul” (187). When the Master appears, he is in the door frame of the log hut “tattered” and “disheveled” with “pained and anxious” eyes (186). When he begins to beckon to Margarita, she wakes up.



Margarita's interpretation of the dream sets her apart from the other superfluous characters of the text. Instead of feelings of fear or dread, the dream fills her with comfort. In her mind, the dream can be interpreted in one of two ways: either she will be reunited soon with the Master in death or the Master is alive and reminding her of his existence. She is fully optimistic by the prospect of either interpretation and believes "everything will turn out well" (186). This scene, in its entirety, emphasizes Margarita's growing dissemblance to the superfluous character tradition. She is able to reinterpret and reimagine her future as something positive and exciting. She finds power in her mind and in her own imagination. Furthermore, throughout the entire novel, Margarita has great respect and admiration for the imagination of others. Once the Master and she begin a love affair, it is Margarita's vigor and optimism that keeps his writing project afloat. The Master admits, "at times her fascination with it would make me jealous" (121).

Margarita's passion is externalized in her direct and outspoken nature. When Margarita interacts with Azazello for the first time, she is skeptical and crass towards him. Azazello, a stranger to her at this moment, knows intimate details about her life. Instead of becoming scared or confused, Margarita is extremely angry. Azazello tells Margarita he has an invitation for her, to which she retorts "A new breed has appeared: street pimps" before rising to leave (192). Similarly she calls Azazello a "scoundrel" and holds her own throughout the tense conversation. Finally, Azazello reveals he knows about the Master and her desire to discover his whereabouts. Once Margarita realizes

Azazello has information that she wants, she adjusts her demeanor accordingly. She obeys his command to sit down and lowers her voice to a whisper. She then apologizes her for rash behavior and falls into a “submissive silence” (193). The power dynamics have shifted, but Margarita is skillful in her ability to adapt and play along. After Azazello declares, “A troublesome race, these women!” Margarita is fierce and honest in her response, stating, “Stop trying to mystify and torment me with your riddles...I’m an unhappy person, and you’re taking advantage of that” (194). Later in their conversation, Margarita declares “...if you destroy me, you’ll be sorry! Yes you will! Because I’ll be dying for love” and she pounds her chest and lifts her gaze towards the sun. In navigating her interaction with Azazello, Margarita takes steps toward attaining her goal of a reunion with the Master. In this scene she is skillful in her communication tactics and self-aware enough to understand how to manipulate the power dynamics in her favor. She is no longer wallowing in self pity, and soon Woland offers her a way out of her despondency.

Margarita, as the active heroine, illustrates the revitalization that is possible with an escape from internal isolation towards greater freedom. Prior to making use of Azazello’s cream, Margarita is worn-out and aged beyond her years. Application of the cream transforms her anew. The “tiny vertical line on the bridge of her nose,” a stress line that appeared after the Master disappears, leaves her face immediately. Her skin begins to glow and the headache that was bothering her all evening dissipates as if a “needle had been removed from her brain” (196). Bulgakov connects this overall beauty

and well-being to an inner peace and a vitality of spirit. Margarita's mind and body are consciously in conversation during her transformation and the physical beauty is simply a concrete manifestation of her internal rejuvenation. The cream not only transforms her outer appearance but "her whole body, every part of it, surged with joy." In this moment, "Margarita felt free, free of everything," and her soul is "relieved of every care" (197).

With Margarita's relief in freedom comes her newfound sense of power. As mentioned, Margarita has moments of intensity and determination earlier in the novel, but when she uses the cream her confidence increases. Once transformed, she first decides to toy with her neighbor Nikolai Ivanovich for her own entertainment and as a "way of saying goodbye" (198). She sits on the windowsill in her chemise presenting herself to Nikolai who is sitting on the bench below. Nikolai, a respectable business man, looks at her and "clutch[es] his briefcase to his chest" (199). Throughout their entire interaction Nikolai is uncomfortable and never utters a word. Margarita, on the other hand, is emboldened. She scolds him for ignoring her and calls him a "bore" (199). She then proclaims, "tired I am of you all, and how happy I am to be leaving you!" She hops on her broom, removes her chemise, and tosses it on Nikolai's head. Nikolai is embarrassed and stupefied. He is blinded by the chemise and "tumb[les] off the bench onto the bricks of the path" (200). Here, we see the stark juxtaposition between the superfluous man and what Margarita has become. Nikolai is passive and defenseless before Margarita. Margarita, in turn, is completely annoyed by his inaction. She seems willing to try anything to gain a response or reaction. Margarita leads their interaction as Nikolai never

speaks; he is silenced in his inability to understand and believe what is before him.

Margarita knows this, and takes advantage of his befuddlement for her own amusement.

In this scene, she rejects a society that she finds lifeless and looks forward to an unknown and mystical future.

Bulgakov further expands the theme of holistic happiness, a combination of mind and body bliss, as Margarita takes flight. Here, Margarita's flight is an embodiment of her societal freedom. When Margarita sheds her clothes and jumps aboard the broom, there is something celebratory about this moment, as she is now "invisible and free!" flying over all of Moscow to save her beloved (201). During her solo journey, Margarita is in complete control over her own future. She "develops great mastery over her broom" and asserts herself by entering the kitchen of two women to intervene in their frivolous argument (202). Margarita's pivotal moment of redemptive agency occurs when she flies upon the DRAMLIT house. She discovers the home of Latunsky, the editor who criticized the Master's novel, and she wreaks havoc on the interior. Margarita first destroys Latunsky's piano by pounding the keys with her hammer. The instrument "droned, howled, wheezed, and clinked" (203). She then proceeds to flood the apartment, break pots and mirrors, and slash the sheets with a kitchen knife (204). Margarita lashes out at the critic who is responsible for destroying the Master's self-esteem. But on a larger scale, she uses her supernatural abilities to take action against an exclusive society that once restrained and dictated her future happiness. Here, Margarita's

actions channel earlier ones taken by Woland in an attempt to dismantle a restrictive society through physical and spatial destruction.

Bulgakov does not villainize Margarita for her actions. Instead, he strategically follows the scene of violence with one of motherly kindness. As Margarita escapes her site of destruction, she sees a young boy in an apartment window nearby. The boy is fearful so Margarita calms him, convincing him he is in a dream. She then proceeds to tell a fairy tale until he drifts asleep (206). Here, Bulgakov presents the reader with two seemingly contradictory sides of Margarita—both of which we had no exposure to prior. Margarita is both spiteful in her revenge and caring in her motherly intuition at once. Bulgakov's return to folklore through Margarita's storytelling reminds the reader of Margarita's ties to an old Russia, a Russia before the imposition of Soviet values.

After her revenge on Latunsky, a sense of calm floods Margarita. Margarita's flight above Moscow is depicted as a spiritual journey. She chooses to slow down her speed and take in her surroundings, signifying a shift in her previous mentality. Prior to this moment, she was fervently focused on finding the Master. But now she takes time to "enjoy the flight to the fullest...there was no reason for her to be bored by such senseless speed and altitude" (207). Margarita is now calm and controlled, fully engaged with the present moment. Suddenly, "the earth rose up to meet her" and out of the mystery of the "formless once black mass" she is able to understand its "mysteries and charm" (207). While moving at a slower and more controlled pace, Margarita is able to engage with nature in an entirely new way. She notices and listens to frogs singing, she "graz[es] the

tops of enormous pines,” and is “alone with the moon”—often a mythological symbol for the female— all the while focusing on the journey rather than the end goal (207). Here, I couldn’t help but be reminded of a quote from Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot* in which the narrator muses, “it’s life that matters, nothing but life— the process of discovering, the everlasting and perpetual process, not the discovery itself, at all” (206). Through the experience of Margarita’s flight, Bulgakov, like Dostoyevsky, attests that life and the process of meaning making is meant to be experienced and enjoyed. It can also be argued that Bulgakov is influenced by the ideas of Shamanism, deriving from native people of Siberia. Kocku von Stuckrad notes that the ideologies associated with Shamanism had a strong resurgence in the modern period, deriving from the “exclusion or sublimation of the ‘sacred’” that was common for the time (773). Moreover, Shamanism can be seen as a counter-reaction to society’s “disenchantment” and those aligned with its revitalization long for the “concrete magic” of the past. Margarita’s newfound connection to the natural world, specifically to the moon, can thus be connected to Shamanism and to a yearning for a source of concrete magic. Margarita finds new pathways for connection to the universe and time slows down to accommodate the process. Thus, Margarita experiences a shamanic journey of sorts, which Stuckrad claims is designed “as a means to communicate with those layers of reality that are not all accessible in normal states of consciousness” (799). In this sense, Margarita’s flight is one of renewal as she feels a connection to the universe that did not exist from her home in Soviet Russia.

Once Margarita reaches her destination and meets Woland, she agrees to be the hostess of the The Grand Ball of the Full Moon (229). In her associations with the devil, Margarita is transformed into a symbol of the female demon. Prior to the ball's commencement, she is washed in "hot, thick, red" blood and tastes the "salt on her lips" (223). In her study of the history of female demons in literature, Nina Auerbach argues that often "women and creature are dynamically isolated by a male-controlled world over which they gain ascendancy...men are less her brothers than is the spectrum of creations mutants" (66). Margarita truly seems to feel at home in the satanic realm of Woland's world. When Woland worries about the sadness "poisoning [her] soul," Margarita claims that now with him she "feel[s] completely fine" (220). According to Auerbach, female demons are historically connected to the divine, bearing an "eerie resemblance to their angelic counterparts" (75). Because the female is oppressed, placed somewhere outside of the society she inhabits, the angel-woman is "free from the boundaries that determine the citizen" and in turn, "free to acknowledge her intimacy with demonism" (95).

Notably, right after being washed in blood, Margarita is "rubbed with large green leaves until she sparkled" (95). Here, she is associated with a sense of lightness and playfulness in contradiction to the hot blood in which she was soaked. Bulgakov comments on the interconnectedness of light and dark, good and evil, in many other places in the novel. We see this communion most concretely in Woland's character in the second half of the novel. Woland is not purely evil as one might expect the devil to be.

At times he is goofy, witty, and even sympathetic in his interactions with Margarita. This also serves to explain the contradictory nature of Margarita's actions throughout the text. Much like Woland, Margarita cannot be neatly characterized as either "good" or "evil." To put her in either category would be limit and restrict her. Margarita's actions are derived from past life experiences and, even at times, emotional whims. Bulgakov rejects harsh binary constructions by regarding them as impractical to the process of meaning making. Thus, at once Margarita can be both angelic and demonic and is not solely defined by either category. This way of thinking would have been controversial to the Soviet mindset, where harsh distinctions between good and evil prevailed. Through his creation of Margarita with both demon and angel attributes, Bulgakov leaves room for the gray area. This gray area is much more complex, and in a way much more unsettling, particularly for totalitarian governments hoping to control the thoughts and beliefs of their citizens. Margarita, like all Russians living in Stalin's regime, transcends rigid categorizations and opens room for questioning and understanding.

As the hostess of the Grand Ball, Margarita's voice and ideas are valued by all present. When she compliments the conductor of the event, her voice is so powerful it "drowned out the sound of the orchestra" and the conductor in turn, "trembled with happiness" at her praise (224). Margarita must then greet endless numbers of guests, all of whom are corrupt or have committed heinous crimes. The first guest is a counterfeiter and traitor to his country, who poisoned the king's mistress while the second guest was a queen's lover who poisoned his wife (226). As the guests come filing in, their stories are



variants of the same theme. They honor Margarita with honor by kissing her knee. Here, Bulgakov satirizes the state of humanity; criminals and crooks in life are gathered in good-natured heathen opulence in their death.

It is interesting to note that Margarita remains unbiased toward the criminals, taking in all the information without much commentary, until she is confronted with Frieda, a woman who has killed her baby. Korovyov explains to Margarita that the woman was “lured into a storeroom” by her boss while waitressing. After giving birth, the woman took the baby into the woods and stuffed a handkerchief in his mouth because “she had nothing to feed the child” (228). As her punishment, a handkerchief has been laid out on her night table every night for the last thirty years, so the woman is perpetually reminded of her crime. Her efforts to burn and drown the piece of fabric are fruitless. Moving away from her previous indifference, Margarita asks, “and where is the owner of the cafe?” (228). Upon Behemoth’s snide reply to the irrelevancy of her question, Margarita is overcome with anger. She sinks “the sharp nails of her left hand into Behemoth’s ear” while whispering threateningly, “if you dare, you bastard, to butt into the conversation one more time” (228). Something is awakened in Margarita. Through the dialogue between Behemoth and Margarita, Bulgakov presents a very realistic conversation that hovers near a 21st century debate over women’s rights. Who should be held accountable for this baby? Russian society, with a vast history of patriarchy, believes one thing, which is reflected in Behemoth’s attitudes towards Frieda. However, Margarita questions Frieda’s condemnation. She gives Frieda extra attention,

asks her if she likes champagne, and Frieda in turn stretches both of her hands out towards Margarita in appreciation (229). Margarita states, “Drink as much as you want tonight Frieda, and don’t worry about anything” (229).

For the rest of the party, Margarita is tormented by Frieda’s story. When making her rounds, she stumbles upon a large pool that is “wafting the intoxicating smell of champagne” (231). Here she recognizes Frieda again. Her head begins to spin and the sight makes her disoriented. Margarita’s kinship towards Frieda is tied to the moral complexity the two women share. Margarita, not solely angelic, is able to empathize with Frieda. Frieda, too, represents the true complexity of good and evil as a woman existing in a gray space. If someone has committed a terrible crime or made a horrible choice, does this automatically make them a bad person? Should they be punished for all eternity?

Bulgakov’s fascination with precarious gray spaces is expanded when the ball has ended and the guests have gone home. Margarita feels content as she participates with the devil and his cohorts in a “merry supper” (240). The scene is one of deep fulfillment, a feeling that has eluded Margarita in her life in Moscow. There is a “dry, fragrant warmth” amidst the candlelight and fireplace which “spread[s] through the room in waves.” Upon finishing her meal, Margarita is “overcome by a feeling of bliss” (240). This is the first time Margarita is fully at peace without the Master at her side. In this moment, “she had no desire to go anywhere.” Here, we return to Bulgakov’s conversation with shamanism. Just as Margarita is able to do in her flight of solitude, she

now feels a union with her environment and her soul finds relief. But this moment is fleeting and soon her restlessness returns. She mutters that once she leaves she will “go down to the river and drown [her]self” (240). It is clear from this drastic switch in thought that Margarita is still plagued by unhappiness and dissatisfaction that remains deeply rooted in her psyche.

Margarita fully transcends her superfluity when Woland gives her the power to choose her reward in return for hostessing the ball. Prior to this moment, Margarita is perplexed that her reward has not been mentioned. As she gets up to leave, Woland approves of her action, exclaiming, “that’s the way!...never ask for anything! Not ever... especially from someone who’s more powerful than you are” (241). Bulgakov returns to satirizing the common ideas of Soviet Russians. Social hierarchies, as depicted through the emotional turmoil of Pilate, are a domineering force; therefore, there is no sense in trying to ask for anything. Woland continues to encourage Margarita. “Show more courage!” he demands.

Instead of using her power for her own self-interests, as the other powerful characters have done within the novel—i.e. Pontius Pilate and Poplavsky— Margarita does something that no other character in the novel is able to do, she acts purely for the benefit of another. Margarita’s decision to save Frieda from eternal suffering over finding the Master reveals her true empathic and human side. She is far from self-righteous in her decision. She states matter-of-factly, “I am a thoughtless person. I asked you on Frieda’s behalf because I was careless enough to give her real hope...she believes

in my power...I'll have no peace for the rest of my life" (242). Margarita chooses to help a fellow woman who is suffering. Frieda "believes in [her] power" because she has nothing else to believe in. Moreover, Woland does not relieve Frieda himself, instead he tells Margarita that she has the capability to do it on her own. Margarita tells Frieda "you are forgiven," an act of benevolence that no one else has allowed her. Margarita's selfless act is soon repaid to her. In karmic fashion, Woland transports the Master into their room uniting the lovers. It is difficult not to read this pivotal moment in the text as a feminist one. Margarita, no longer stifled by her unhappiness over the loss of the Master, is able to look beyond the goal that was motivating her throughout the entire novel. Her ties to Woland and in turn to patriarchy are effectively broken as she uses the power she is given, now completely her own power, to help save another woman. Her decision is a hopeful one. Bulgakov presents the reader with an alternative to superfluity and despondency. If Margarita can gain power and use it to help humanity, can others do it too? What would that kind of society look like? The reader is left to wonder, speculate, and imagine that future.

For the first time in the text, Woland, Margarita, and the Master are all in one place. In alignment with his superfluous nature, the Master tells Woland that he is no one, to which Margarita retorts "he's the Master, Messire, I can assure you of that" (246). Once again Margarita restores the identity of the Master and in a sense, brings him out of his delusions and back to a place of worth and stability. The Master claims "things can't go back to the way they used to be" and Woland replies, "That's true. But we'll give it a

try” (246). In this moment, the “gray” supernatural space, unites the characters. Woland is not purely evil, Margarita is not purely good, the Master is not solely unnecessary. To the contrary, his comment is quite astute in its simplicity. Things can’t go back to the way they used to be, and they truly don’t. But the spirit of Woland’s response alludes to a hopefulness. His response asserts one can’t stay static in life simply out of resignation, and so the only other options must be to try.

Unpacking *The Master and Margarita* with a feminist lens is a challenging task. Marsh argues that “works currently shaping the classical Russian literary canon pay far more attention to the ‘superfluous man’ than the ‘superfluous woman’ in 19th century Russian society” (22). To combat this, many Russian female authors in the 19th century worked to make their stories heard. However, in both fiction and criticism, their voices were often ignored, discredited, or misconceived. Historically, female characters in Russian literature are presented as clichés, often associated with animal, vulnerable child, idealized mother, angel, or demon. In Russian literature, especially with male authors in the Russian canon, female characters are often limited and serve to strengthen the protagonist’s development. Moreover, Marsh states, “whereas psychology of of the male protagonist is frequently portrayed with a great detail and complexity, female characters are generally depicted from the outside, seldom described in detail, and largely presented through male eyes” (6). A main aspect of the literary traditions in Russian is the author’s exploration of what it means to be Russian in their works in an attempt to separate themselves from European traditions that came before them. However, aspects of

Russian society that are inherently gendered are problematic for the female author, who must contend with an established bias within her own country— that is still prevalent today— equating the experience of being Russian with the experience of being a man. According to Marsh, “In Russian culture Russia is female, but to be Russian is predominately male” (28). Thus, Russian women face institutionalized and internalized hurdles on the path to recognition that their male peers do not.

Many places within Bulgakov’s work were difficult to digest as a feminist reader. For one, I had trouble reconciling with Bulgakov’s care and attention towards Margarita’s physical appearance. The scene described earlier in which Margarita is transformed can easily be read as sexist recurrence of the cliché female makeover from wearied and tired looking to young, vivacious, thus aligning them with culturally rewarded beauty standards. But as mentioned earlier, Bulgakov’s message is different. He associates vivacity with a feeling within, a feeling of completeness and satisfaction. There is also a focus on relief from unnatural beauty rituals when Margarita’s plucked eyebrows are thickened and her hair-salon perm is loosened and replaced by her natural curls (197). Thin eyebrows and tight curls represent aspects of beauty valued by Russian society, and the cream returns Margarita to the beauty of her natural state. With this in mind, I still find Bulgakov’s descriptions of beauty in the physical sense distracting to Margarita’s connection to the spiritual realm and natural world. Moreover, despite associations with folkloric universality mentioned earlier, it is impossible completely to ignore Margarita’s lack of psychological development. Through the Master’s story and depiction of his

lover we are able to see Margarita's unhappiness and understand she is a woman of passion and drive. However, I found Margarita to be at times too mysterious. Margarita can't possibly only care about finding her lover and helping his career, can she? What else is driving this woman? What does she care about besides the Master? When she decides to save Frieda over finding the Master it becomes obvious that Margarita deeply cares for people and has a great capacity for empathy and love. I was left wishing that Bulgakov had expanded this further or even that the second half of the novel delved deeper into Margarita's consciousness. Marsh notes that very few male-authored texts in Russia are presented through women's consciousness and in the ones that do, "women still emerge largely as victims of male use and abuse, rather than autonomous human beings" (6). In order for Margarita to be a more fully developed heroine, I would have liked to see more autonomy in her desires and actions.

As mentioned previously, Marsh argues that Margarita's connections both to Woland and the Master limit her from being a truly empowered character. I do agree Margarita's ties to her male counterparts, especially her obsession with the Master's work and her lack of passions or her own interests, are problematic. But I propose that her relationship with Woland, is in fact, necessary. If we view Woland in the role of an advocate to Margarita, some of the problems with her relationship to him are eliminated. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines and advocate as "a person who pleads for or speaks on behalf of another" (OED online). Often the advocate is in a place of higher privilege or power. Woland, instead of speaking on Margarita's behalf, helps her by

giving her the power to do so. In the end, the choice of how to use it is up to her. Is it then important from where she got the power? Isn't it more important how she uses the power she's given? By using her power to help another, Margarita ultimately breaks from her superfluous chains and rejects the values of an oppressive, patriarchal society, which values wealth and power above all else. Woland's world, with Margarita as agent, values humanity and vulnerability. In this light, the "gray space" that Bulgakov has imagined is a space outside of Soviet constraints and outside of patriarchal norms. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, it can be argued that Margarita's representation is a satirical one that connects her to the Soviet woman of the time. Women were still making strides to break free from oppression, and are still to this day. The portrayal of Margarita stepping into her power is an optimistic message for Russian women.

While originally stemming from the superfluous tradition, Margarita is given a truly unique path. Once powerless and restless, she soon becomes a metaphor for a larger vision of escape and cultural revision for Russia. Bulgakov recognizes that a break from superfluity may seem impossible under Communism, and thus, under patriarchy. Therefore, he creates the supernatural female character who functions to represent the possibility for human growth and social change. Imagination and creation are the only mediums where such a vision can exist and be actualized. As the novel states, "manuscripts don't burn," and the power of art will persist and inspire.



## CHAPTER FOUR: CONCLUSION

In his essay on the creative voice in *The Master and Margarita*, W.J. Leatherbarrow aptly notes the difficulty critics face when presented with the “slipperiness” of Bulgakov’s work. He goes on to claim that *The Master and Margarita* cannot be fully unpacked by “any single wave of a critical wand” (29). For me, the difficulties presented themselves in attempting to discern a central meaning when faced with the text’s contradictions. Is Margarita representative of a woman with agency? Or is she in her portrayal as sexy and forgiving critiquing the limitations for women in Russian society? Or, alternatively, is Bulgakov completely uninterested in gender relations and constructions? I find the slippery nature of this novel the very thing that makes it so complicated and also so relevant. Just like the fluidity of the superfluous man term itself, just like the very complex existence of the intelligentsia in Russia throughout history, things are not easily defined or wrapped up nicely with a bow. By subverting the superfluous man motif through his female hero, Bulgakov presents his readers with an alternative. Rooted in the past, his novel transcends Russian history and the plight of the dispossessed intelligentsia. Margarita is a sympathetic and hopeful character. In her creation and representation, Russians see the possibility for escape. Bulgakov believes in

the power and beauty of art as much as Margarita does. As a long admirer of Russian literature, reading this novel opened my eyes to the possibility of a strong female heroine in Russian literature. Although I found aspects of Margarita's characterization problematic, Bulgakov's work led me to question what else was out there, what voices had I not yet heard? I thus find it relevant to examine the works of two Russian women writers who have created similar fictional pieces to Bulgakov in order to uncover points of connection.

As women represent a group in Russian society most often ignored or underestimated underneath a patriarchal regime, there is more exigence for them to imagine a world outside of the society that oppresses them. Benjamin Sutcliffe argues that historically Russian women writers were not taken seriously in Russian culture. Russian society frequently rejected female art as inferior stemming from an "uneasiness concerning the everyday and female experiences, and how these two combine in fictional form" (4). Women writers have an arguably stronger desire for social change and thus spend less time reflecting Russia's problems and more time envisioning and depicting what is possible. In this conclusion, I plan to examine the work of Teffi— pseudonym of Nadezhda Alexandrovna Lokhvitskaya—whose first publication dates back to as early as 1901 and also Tatyana Tolstaya whose publications of fictional short stories began in the 1990s. I hope to uncover how the works by these women authors function to achieve a goal similar to Bulgakov's through an attempt to redefine the role of the citizen under oppressive regimes and under patriarchy, thus looking past the superfluous man tradition

entirely. These authors create and envision spaces where change is not only possible but also necessary and inevitable.

In *The Master and Margarita*, Bulgakov begins with the ordinary lives of Soviet Russia but soon incorporates elements of the extraordinary. Similarly, in order to portray an imaginative future, many Russian female writers began with the familiar. For women throughout Russian history, the most familiar place was within the home and the confines of their average day-to-day lives. In its distinction from public positions of power and political expansion, daily life and its associated issues were perceived as, “petty, small-scale, mundane, exhausting, and repetitive” (Sutcliffe 5). Masculine pursuits in the workplace were more valuable in their perceived ability to make a permanent impact on society. Sutcliffe claims that tasks were often gendered in Soviet Russia, aligning them with the government’s heavy reliance on binary opposition, and subsequent dismissal of any potential gray area. According to Sutcliffe, “while the male was proactive in culture, the female was assumed to be reactive” (5). This perception seems to be largely refuted by the earlier unpacking of the superfluous man which revealed that the despondency of the intelligentsia existed across both genders. Women’s tasks, in their association with care-taking and the home, were seen as more physical than mental and thus undervalued.

Both Teffi and Tolstaya begin their tales within the confines of daily life. However, as one will see, their stories make a urgent leap from the ordinary to the extraordinary. Remaining in the realm of realism, the 19th century superfluous man makes no attempt at such a leap and no attempt to see outside the world of government

oppression and patriarchy. Teffi and Tolstaya begin with real lives and real problems of society and envision a world where things are not quite how they appear to dismantle societal structure. Bulgakov, too, attempts a similar project. Within these confines of daily life, Russian women authors promoted escape. Often escape is found by pulling from the traditions of Russian folktales and utilizing the magical realism genre to explore the possibility of transformation.

This path leads us first to Teffi, pseudonym of Nadezdha Alexandrovna Lokhvitskaya. Teffi was born in 1872 to a family of the gentry class who valued literature above most things; she and all three of her sisters became writers with varying degrees of success. Teffi began by writing lyrical poetry under her maiden name in 1901. At the end of that same year she began to transition to satirical verses under her pseudonym. In later years she wrote feuilletons for liberal newspapers—also a side job of Bulgakov. She wrote a one-act play titled *The Woman Question* which was staged successfully in St. Petersburg in 1907. Teffi was politically engaged in actively supporting the 1905 Revolution. A few of her poems were featured in the Bolshevik newspaper, and later served as a non-Party member of their editorial board. Teffi's revolutionary spirit co-existed with a light-hearted nature. Under political unrest, she believed in the power of and longing for laughter within Russian hearts and minds. In 1908 and 1909 she wrote for satirical and humor magazines as her popularity grew. Her leanings toward humor are also reflected in her fictional works in 1910 she published short stories which were received with critical praise. Post-revolution, Teffi settled in

Paris where she continued to be an important literary figure (Chandler 165). According to Chandler, Teffi was essentially forgotten during the first forty or so years after her death, possibly because Western and Soviet scholars often ignore émigré literature (165).

The imagery and style of Teffi's short fiction are heavily influenced by Russian folklore. Her stories combine magic, humor, and transformation as strategies for coping with the oppressive aspects of Russian society. Bulgakov is said to have admired her work, as the two shared similar ironical leanings. In 1947, Teffi published an article entitled "Baba Yaga" in which she comments on the traditional witch in Russian folklore. Teffi's fascination with Baba Yaga lies not only in the history she represents but in her inherent desire for destruction as the "goddess of whirlwinds and snowstorms" (211). According to Teffi, Baba Yaga instills fear in both appearance and countenance. Compared to goddesses of Greek and Roman mythology, Baba Yaga is severely lacking in beauty and grace. This "hideous" and "vicious" old woman is a vastly different depiction of womanhood than we often see (213). Teffi argues that traditional Russian spirits and ancient gods are representative of chaos and terror. The characteristics she describes are aligned closely with those of the trickster, common in Native American folklore. Tricksters too spend much of their time stirring up trouble and causing confusion. Baba Yaga hates people and only expects the worst of Russians, assuming they will only tell her lies, cheat her, and then disappear. Baba Yaga loves the "fierce" nature of winter winds in which she can be "terrible and powerful...free, free as can be" (216).

Teffi depicts Baba Yaga's desire for destruction as a joyous release. Baba Yaga "howls" and "whirls" taking on a "crazed" motion. Set in contrast to the superfluous man tradition, Teffi's fascination with the Baba Yaga represents a much more active and urgent longing for change. Instead of presenting a static and pitiful character to aspire not to be, she creates a vivid picture of what could be possible with Baba Yaga's riotous spirit as our guide. In the final scene of her essay she describes a man whom Baba Yaga has knocked into the snow for no apparent reason. The man is not angered by his fall as the reader expects instead with his "white icy curls...poking out from under his cap" he is enchanted by the "free and wonderful" song of the blizzard. He feels "both terrified and full of joy" (217). I can't help but see this man as the counter-narrative to that of the superfluous man. Yes, violence is inflicted on him, but it seems to be necessary violence. Much like the superfluous men in *The Master and Margarita*, the man confronted with Baba Yaga seems lost, possibly in need of inspiration. I'm left to wonder how Oblomov's fate would be altered if only Baba Yaga had been nearby to shove him off of the couch.

Teffi's description of Baba Yaga lends insight into Bulgakov's choice ending of the *Master and Margarita*. Much like Baba Yaga, Woland is a supernatural force who advocates destruction. In the final scenes of the novel, Moscow is shrouded in darkness. Bulgakov writes, "night overtook the cavalcade, spreading over them from above and scattering white specks of stars here and there in the saddened sky" (321). Night is described as "thick" as a "black kerchief" working to "unmask all illusions" (320). Moreover, as the text progresses, the characters begin to glorify destruction through the

act of burning structures to the ground. Behemoth and Korovyov take to igniting parts of the city, first the Griboyedov house and then the Master's home. When his home begins to burn, the Master tosses his books into the flames and shouts, "burn, burn, former life!" to which Margarita exclaims, "burn, suffering!" (314). The destruction described by Bulgakov is also a necessary one. Teffi and Bulgakov depict destruction as a cathartic release, one holding the possibility for renewal. Bulgakov's choice of language reflects this: the Master's burning room "shimmers" in "crimson colors" (314), and during the storm, the rooftops "give way to greenery" and "transform" into three huge bubbles (315). Without destruction there would be no transformation, no newness. Without darkness, there would be no light.

Teffi's short story "The Kind That Walk," engages with the transformation of a local carpenter named Moshka. Told through the perspective of a young girl, the story begins with a familiar scene. A group of dogs are howling at the handyman Moshka as he approaches a client's home. The narrator notes that there is no reason for the dog's reaction because based on outward appearances, Moksha looks like any other carpenter (187). However, there is something unique about Moshka, which Teffi expertly weaves into the story as if it were a common plot point. Moksha, the narrator informs us, "was dragged off by the devil" on Yom Kippur (188). The narrator then relays humorous rumors and speculations of how this scene played out, each one building on the other's absurdity. Some people of the town deny the devil was involved altogether, opting for Moshka's escape to America to avoid military service as an alternative story. To this

alternative, a townsman ironically replies, “What far- fetched tales people come up with! When with our very own eyes we saw the devil drag him away” (189).

The narrator, as a young girl, is fascinated with the stories about Moshka and with Moshka himself. She stands for hours, holding her breath, watching him while being “lured into a hypnotic trance” (190). Teffi writes, “something strange, pleasant, and irresistible would come over us, enchanting us, bewitching us, taking over our strength and will” (190). The narrator’s fascination reflects an inability to escape the darkness that Moshka represents to the town. While others in the town are fearful of Moshka’s existence, the narrator seems to revel in the mystery.

The mystery and legends surrounding Moshka represent the possibilities of escape through imagination. Teffi writes, “Just think—a man has been carried off by the devil! How often in our humdrum world do you come face to face with something like that?” (191). Thus, the town mystifies Moshka to excite and entertain themselves. When the story grows stale, the town works to find new dramatic details that have been neglected. A new rumor begins to circulate that he is “the kind that walk” that he has once been buried and walked away from his grave site. Soon after, it is revealed Moshka is not just living in an abandoned bathhouse as everyone first assumed but is running a bathhouse for the dead. The narrator assures the reader, “everything had been confirmed by statements from witnesses” (193). The rumors eventually stir up fear among the town. One day, a man suggests they smash the windows and remove the door to Moshka’s home. After Moshka disappears, the townspeople are slightly regretful but burn the



galosh he left just in case because “people knew that if it wasn't destroyed Moshka was sure to come back for it” (195).

This story incorporates many of the same themes as *The Master and Margarita*, the most obvious being the devil infringing on the human world. While the devil here is much more abstract and obviously a creation of the collective mind of the town, through their imagination, he is still a chaotic force. Told through the consciousness of a young girl, Teffi's story also shows the reader a separation between the young narrator and the rest of the town. Moshka and the darkness he represents hold an “inexplicable attraction” for the young narrator and her sister. Margarita, too, had no feelings of fear associated with Woland. At times, she even finds comfort in his presence. The town drives Moshka out because he is different, an outsider. Through this story, Teffi depicts how fear can lead to inhumane choices. By separating the narrator's experience from the rest of the town, she also exposes the danger of looking at the world in harsh binaries. Just as Bulgakov had done in his complex depiction of Woland, the reader is left to question why Moshka was deemed “the one that walks.” The fear of the town is especially absurd when faced with the realization that the town is collectively creating the very story that is causing them anxiety. Imagination cannot only save and restore as we see in *The Master and Margarita*, but it also has the power to close doors and ostracize. Teffi is aware of this, and her story becomes a cautionary tale for all this implies.

Tatayana Tolstaya, who claims Leo Tolstoy as her great-granduncle, was born in 1951 and was perceived as a controversial writer in Russia throughout the 1980s. For

Western audiences, however, Tolstaya represented a new voice out of Russia as a result of Gorbachev's policy of glasnost, or an openness of dialogue in the post-Soviet era.

Tolstaya was one of seven children in her family. Growing up in a literary household, Tolstaya was taught to understand the value of language, humor, and irony at a young age. Between 1983 and 1991, Tolstaya published twenty-one short story narratives which were translated in over a dozen languages and received well by critics and the general public alike. According to Helen Goscilo, Tolstaya's fiction is known for its "fascination with time, memory, imagination, and yearning" borrowing from both myth and creative folklore (318). Just like Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, Tolstaya's fiction also critiques the binary construction of the world in the Soviet period. Characters within her tales feature contradictions and complexities that create a more realistic psychological portrayal of human nature.

Contradictions are also a prevalent characteristic of Zoya, the female protagonist of Tolstaya's story "Hunting the Woolly Mammoth." The narrative begins with the narrator addressing the reader. "Zoya's a beautiful name isn't it?" (51). The narrator continues by musing on societal notions of beauty. Don't worry, the narrator states, Zoya looks appealing on the outside. She is "a good height and all that" with "good legs, good figure, good skin, the nose, eyes, all good" (51). Here the narrator takes on voices of those looking at Zoya from a distance. Her beauty is not described in any vivid detail, but instead as if criteria on a list that can be checked off. The narrator ends by giving us one detail: Zoya is brunette and not blonde because "you can't have everything" (51).

Tolstaya critiques the brutal society women are raised and the expectations that one is expected to meet in order to be pleasing in the eyes of society.

Tolstaya furthers her critique on Soviet society with her inclusion of female internal dialogue. The story is told from the point of view of Zoya, who is in a relationship with a man with two beards, “one thick and dark and in the middle of it, and another smaller and reddish growing in a narrow tuft on his chin” (52) named Vladimir whom she hopes to marry very soon. Zoya spends large amounts of time reflecting on the past and how lovely and romantic their courtship was and compares her previous bliss to her present dissatisfaction. It is in this dissatisfaction that the reader sees Zoya’s connections to superfluity. She is often listless and angry at Vladimir, yet aside from a few passive aggressive fits, she refuses to take steps to alert him of his offensive behavior and actions.

The life that Vladimir wants to live simply does not align itself with Zoya’s ideal. While she hopes for glamorous vacations filled with “noise and wine and midnight swims,” Vladimir prefers “stinky checkered shirts” and kayak trips down the lake (54). On top of this, Vladimir refuses to give Zoya what she truly wants, a marriage proposal. On their kayak trip Zoya is terribly unhappy. She lies in the tent “hating the two beard Vladimir, and want[ing] to marry him as soon as possible” (55). Goscilo notes Tolstaya’s female character development helps to highlight her attempts at creating realistic and complex female characters(319). She does not idealize, or poeticize women. She does not demonize or simplify them. According to Goscilo, “[Tolstaya’s] female characters

fall into several unprepossessing, pitiable, or ice-veined types: the flat-footed dinosaur of a woman sustained by poetic reminiscences and a bounteous spirit, the maladroit female outsider type, and the self-centered pragmatic sirens confident of enslaving admirers” (321). Furthermore, Goscilo points out that in Tolstaya’s fictional women often represent the juxtaposition between exterior perceptions and interior realities (321). Zoya is a beautiful woman seemingly in a happy relationship but on the inside she is angry and critical .

Zoya’s internal transformation from a seething woman lacking the ability to take action to a woman in full control of her future is a swift one. Vladimir takes Zoya to visit an artist friend of his, where she is presented with the artist’s rendering of a tiny person pointing a bow and arrow at a wooly mammoth. Tolstaya writes of the image’s domestic backdrop, “on one side you can see the little cave: it has a light bulb hanging from a cord, a glowing TV screen, and a gas burner...and there's a bouquet of cattails on the table” (59). The pursuit of the wooly mammoth as depicted by the artist mirrors Zoya’s futile attempts to attain Vladimir as her husband. Soon, the wooly mammoth, a species long ago extinct, comes to represent Zoya’s view of Vladimir as a hairy and sweaty beast.

Zoya internalizes the image so intensely that her interactions with Vladimir begin to mix reality with the supernatural. In the artist’s basement, Zoya feels a heightened disconnection between herself and the two men. Internally, her head begins to ache and her ears begin to pound. Externally, the world darkens and the space around her is described in ominous language as the “dusty lamp on the ceiling floated in layers of

bluish smoke,” and the shelves are suddenly “covered with cobwebs” (59). Tolstaya writes, “Zoya wasn't here or anywhere else, she simply did not exist. The rest of the world did not exist either.” (59). Upon leaving the artist’s basement, Zoya imagines pointing her arrow at Vladimir and “drag[ging] the carcass home” (60). Zoya then notices a pigeon with a banded leg on the window. Although the pigeon, as Zoya imagines, is most likely banded by a scientist performing a study, she cannot help but envy it. She contrasts the banded pigeon to her “Unbounded Grief” —a term she has coined to describe her mental state—and is overcome with anguish (61).

When Zoya strangles Vladimir with a noose, it is unclear to the reader whether we are still in the depths of Zoya’s fantasy or in the throws of a real murder scene. The narrator states, “[Zoya] had never in fact liked this man. No, let’s be honest, he had always repulsed her. A small, powerful, heavy, quick, hairy, insensitive animal” (62). Moreover, the narrator begins to refer to Vladimir as an “it” rather than a “he” for the last paragraph of the story. Tolstaya blurs the line between reality and supernatural to baffle the reader as well as to heighten Zoya’s agency. Whether she is imagining the murder or not, Zoya has still had a very real and intense internal transformation. Unlike the superfluous men of Russian literature, Zoya is an example of a female who is capable of seeing outside her situation and imagines or actualizes a way out of it.

In the story “Sonya,” Tolstaya also creates complex female characters who imagine a better and more inclusive world. The narrator of “Sonya” is playful and lazy, often times leaving the reader in a state of confusion. In the opening paragraph, the

narrator rambles on about the precarious existence of memory, and time's ability to fade and distort it, eventually losing it all together. Upon conclusion of this esoteric reflection, the reader is introduced to the female protagonist, Sonya. Sonya is characterized as a memory that will eventually cease to exist. She is depicted as an "utter fool," a "dummy" (147). On top of her lack of intelligence, Sonya is also unattractive and undesirable with "enormous feet" whose only nice possession is a brooch with an enamel white dove on it (147). Despite these unappealing qualities, however, Sonya is a talent in the kitchen, skilled in child care, and gifted with regards to all tasks of the home. Goscilo argues that Sonya's position as a museum curator, while seemingly boring, "preserves culture, just as she sustains the next generation, through feeding, sewing for, and taking care of others' children" (320). It seems here that the narrator fails to acknowledge that Sonya's role as caretaker is crucial to maintaining a social order rooted in Russian tradition, her selfless actions will surely outlast her memory as they look past the here and now and towards the future.

In contrast, Ada, Sonya's acquaintance, is a "sharp, thin woman of serpentine elegance" (146). Out of boredom, Ada and her friends begin to write Sonya love letters pretending to be a man named Nikolai which Sonya falls for with extreme excitement. By creating a space outside of reality, Tolstaya helps to highlight the true attributes of her characters outside of societal perceptions. Sonya is revealed as caring, loyal, and romantic. She sends Nikolai her dove brooch and various other possessions of value (150). Ada, in contrast, becomes insecure and desperate. Ada cannot let go of the letter

writing, she needs this in her life to feel fulfilled. The illicit irony is that the letters from Nikolai make Sonya sincerely happy, and the happiness results from the efforts of a woman who is spending much effort and time to dupe her. When the joke gets tired among her friends, Ada continues to perpetuate the fantasy. Tolstaya sets this tale up with the backdrop of the onset of World War II. Both women deal with extreme hardships in this time. Ada “dug ditches thinking of her son,” “ate everything she could find,” “fueled the stove with Dickens” and finally, “with stiff fingers wrote Sonya Nikolai’s farewell letter” (152). For Ada, the correspondence represented in some ways a hope, a hope for the possibility of leisure, fun, and romance. With violence spreading all around her, now that hope is gone.

In the final scene of the story, Tolstaya again blends reality with fantasy. The narrator reveals that the true end to the tale is unclear and then proceeds to fantasize an ending. Sonya, “half-blind from starvation” takes everything she has, including “a can of pre-war tomato juice” and travels to Nikolai’s apartment to save him with the juice of which there is “exactly enough... for one life” (153). Upon entering the apartment, the narrator slips into Sonya’s consciousness and begins to call Ada Nikolai, immersed within Sonya’s own delusions. From here on, the story becomes mere speculation. The narrator brings us back to the image of the white dove brooch, surmising that perhaps Ada saved it and did not burn it after the war as she did her other possessions. The story ends with the line “After all, doves don’t burn” (154). Not only is this sentence reminiscent of Bulgakov’s line “manuscripts don’t burn,” but the image of a dove is also

deeply rooted in Russian folklore. Sonya and Ada are women affected by war and sadness, but through the eyes of the narrator, they find love and acceptance through a fantasy. By imagining Nikolai as a real man out in the world, Sonya is able to escape some of her pain and hardship. Ada, although aware of the absurdity of it all, still finds comfort in the fake relationship. Tolstaya's story shows the reader the importance of the imagination in times of loneliness and chaos.

Both of Tolstaya's stories harken back to Bulgakov. In each tale, art and the ability to imagine play a large role in bringing about transformation and hope. Much like Margarita's obsession with the Master's manuscript, Zoya's obsession with the woolly mammoth painting opens up new pathways for her. In the epilogue of *The Master and Margarita*, the Master is given his own source of power. The Master, now face-to-face with the protagonist of his book, Pontius Pilate, is able to release Pilate from his suffering. The Master and Pilate are shown almost as doubles Pilate murmurs to himself in the same way the Master had in the past. Woland tells the Master "you can finish your novel in a single sentence!" (324). As the creator of the story, the Master has the ability to end Pilate's pain. He "cups his hands like a megaphone" and shouts so loudly that "the echo rebounded over the desolate and treeless mountains" (324). His voice is transformed into thunder, and the procurator can now follow a path of moonlight out of the garden. The moon, which was mentioned previously in relation to Margarita's connection to nature and her flight, returns as an important image, one encapsulating the



idea of the harmonic existence of darkness and light; a small beacon of hope in an all-encompassing dark sky.

Just as the procurator is saved through the Master's imagination, the Master himself is saved through Margarita's. Margarita tells the Master, "you will fall asleep with a smile on your lips. You will never be able to chase me away. I will guard your sleep" (325). This image and the future that she has envisioned for them finally puts the Master at peace. Bulgakov writes

Thus spoke Margarita as she walked with the Master toward their eternal home, and it seemed to the Master that Margarita's words flowed like the stream they had left behind, flowed and whispered, and the Master's anxious, needle-pricked memory began to fade. Someone was releasing the Master into freedom, as he himself had released the hero he created. (325)

Margarita's words hold great power. They take on a life of their own and begin to flow as if truly connecting to the Master's heart. This passage relates to Margarita's ability to release Frieda from suffering earlier in the novel and once again highlights that both imagination and words are the keys to renewal. For the Master to be released from his pain and suffering, the pain and suffering of the superfluous man, he must first recognize and accept darkness as an intricate part of the world and then find power in his own mind to transcend that darkness. Margarita, with help from Woland, succeeds in revealing this message to the Master. In Nikolai Ivanovich's final dream, Margarita is still leading the Master, who is now referred to as Patient No. 118, noting that he is still superfluous in life but has been restored in his love with Margarita and in his death.

The subtle irony and mystery presented by Bulgakov in *The Master and Margarita* is a testament to his genius. As a novel that has established itself in university scholarship, I hope this examination will open new doors for conversation on systematic oppression that is occurring all over the world to this day. Returning to Arendt's philosophical reflections on the roots of totalitarianism, it is clear that the fears associated with governmental power are still relevant in today's world. Arendt notes that the citizens faced with injustice in Soviet Russia "realized their lives and the lives of their families depended not on their fellow-citizens but exclusively on the whims of the government which they faced in complete loneliness without any help whatsoever from the group to which they happened to belong" (320). Just earlier this year, Vladimir Putin approved a legal change that decriminalized certain forms of domestic violence, making "moderate" violence within families an administrative, rather than criminal, offense. In America there began new attempts to strip women of basic human rights and affordable healthcare. The themes of Bulgakov's masterpiece are all too familiar. When we turn to art, Bulgakov's text allows us a pathway into these conversations.

Through the use of satire, *The Master and Margarita* asks questions about power and control, while imagining a world in which helping another human being is rewarded. In the end, Bulgakov's message is a simple one: we can save each other. Teffi's and Tolstaya's fiction reflects a similar idea while helping to shape the thoughts and voices of women in a time where they are still marginalized. By spending time with these texts we can see the urgency of their message and necessity for their existence. There is hope to

defy superfluity through empathy and human connection. In *The Master and Margarita* this hope lies in imagination, creation, and, as reflected in the relationship between Margarita and the Master; the ability and patience to lead and help another human being.

## WORKS CITED

- "advocate, n." *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, March 2017. Web. 4 May 2017.
- Akhmatova, Anna. "In Memory of M. B." *Poems of Akhmatova*, translated by Stanley Kunitz, Atlantic Monthly Press, 1973.
- Alexander, Alex E. *Russian Folklore: An Anthology in English Translation*. Norland Publishing, 1975.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. The World Publishing Company, 1958.
- Arnds, Peter. "Blasphemy and Sacrilege in the Novel of Magical Realism: Grass, Bulgakov, and Rushdie." *Negotiating the Sacred II: Blasphemy and Sacrilege in the Arts*, edited by Elizabeth Burns Coleman and Maria Suzette Fernandes-Diaz, ANU Press, 2008.
- Armstrong, Judith M. "The True Origins of the Superfluous Man." *Russian, Croatian and Serbian, Czech and Slovak, Polish Literature*, vol. 12, no. 3, 1985, pp. 279-297.
- Browning, Genia K. *Women & Politics in the U.S.S.R.: Consciousness Raising and Soviet Women's Groups*. Wheatsheaf Books, 1987.
- Bulgakov, Mikhail. *The Master and Margarita*, translated by Diana Burgin and Katherine Tiernan O'Connor, Vintage International, 1996.
- Chandler, Robert. "Introduction." *Russian Magic Tales from Pushkin to Platonov*, edited by Robert Chandler, Penguin Books, 2012.
- Clardy, Jesse V. and Betty S. Clardy. *The Superfluous Man in Russian Letters*. University Press of America, 1980.

- Curtis, J.A.E. *Manuscripts Don't Burn: Bulgakov a Life in Letters and Diaries*. The Overlook Press, 1992.
- Gheith, Jehanne M. "The Superfluous Man and the Necessary Woman: a 'Revision'." *The Russian Review: An American Quarterly Devoted to Russia Past and Present*, vol. 55, no. 2, 1996, pp. 226-244.
- Goncharov, Ivan. *Oblomov*, translated by David Magarshack, Penguin Books, 1954.
- Johnston, Timothy. *Being Soviet: Identity, Rumour, and Everyday Life under Stalin 1939-1953*. Oxford UP, 2011.
- Goscilo, Helena. "Tatyana Tolstaya." *Russian Writers Since 1980*. Gale, 2004.
- Kisel, Maria. "Feuilletons Don't Burn: Bulgakov's 'The Master and Margarita' and the Imagined Soviet Reader." *Slavic Review*, vol. 68, no. 3, pp. 582-600.
- Leatherbarrow, W. J. The Devil and the Creative Visionary in Bulgakov's "Master i Margarita." *New Zealand Slavonic Journal*, no.1, 1975, pp. 29-45.
- Marsh, Rosalind. "Introduction." *Women and Russian Culture: Projections and Self-Perceptions*, edited by Rosalind Marsh, Berghahn Books, 1998.
- Marsh, Rosalind. "An Image of Their Own? Feminism, Revisionism, and Russian Culture." *Women and Russian Culture: Projections and Self-Perceptions*, edited by Rosalind Marsh, Berghahn Books, 1998.
- Milne, Lesley. *Mikhail Bulgakov: A Critical Biography*. Cambridge UP, 1990.
- Milne, Lesley. "Introduction." *Reflective Laughter: Aspects of Humor in Russian Culture*, Anthem Press, 2004.

- Obolonsky, Alexander V. *The Drama of Russian Political History: System Against Individuality*. Texas A&M UP, 2003.
- Presniakov, Aleksander. *Emperor Nicholas I of Russia: The Apogee of Aurocracy*, edited and translated by Judith C. Zacek, Academic International Press, 1974.
- Savkina, Irina. "Irritating Factors: The Reception and Discussion of Feminist Criticism and Gender Studies in the Russian Context." *Russian Studies in Literature*, vol. 44, no.3, 2008, pp. 37-64.
- Seeley, Frank Friedeberg. "The Heyday of the 'Superfluous Man' in Russia." *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 31, no. 76, 1952, pp. 92-112.
- Stenbock-Fermor, Elisabeth. "The Master and Margarita and Goethe's Faust." *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 13, no.3, 1969, pp. 309-325, [www.jstor.org/stable/306352](http://www.jstor.org/stable/306352).
- Sutcliffe, Benjamin M. *The Prose of Life: Russian Women Writers From Khrushchev to Putin*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 2009.
- Teffi. "The Lifeless Beast." *Subtly Worded and Other Stories*, translated by Anne Marie Jackson, Pushkin Press, 2014.
- Teffi. "Baba Yaga." *Russian Magic Tales from Pushkin to Platonov*, edited by Robert Chandler, translated by Robert Chandler, Penguin Books, 2012.
- Tolstaya, Tatyana. "Hunting the Woolly Mammoth." *On The Golden Porch*, translated by Antonina W. Bouis, Alfred A. Knopp, 1989.

Tolstaya, Tatyana. "Sonya." *On The Golden Porch*, translated by Antonina W. Bouis,  
Alfred A. Knopp, 1989.

Turgenev, Ivan. "The Diary of a Superfluous Man." *The Novels of Ivan Turgenev*,  
translated by Constance Garnett, The MacMillan Company, 1926.

von Stuckrad, Kocku. "Reenchanting Nature: Modern Western Shamanism and  
Nineteenth Century Thought." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol.  
70, no. 4, 2002, pp. 771-799.