

The Figure of Pontius Pilate in the Novel *The Master and Margarita* by Bulgakov Compared with Pilate in the Bible

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Summary

The study of the novel The Master and Margarita is focused on the interpretation and the making of a character that Bulgakov created based on the biblical figure. The analytical method used is a comparative one, and the study integrates a deep comparison of the narration techniques and interpretations of the figure in the light of mystic and occult culture. The comparison between the biblical archetype of the character of Pontius Pilate and the re-creation and interpretation of the character in the novel is not just a dry comparison, but it aims to climb over the culture it represents, Christian culture and ethics, regarding the concept of good and evil. As the narrator of the novel changes focus on different subjects, and since the central figure of the storytelling differs, it was more important for us to study the figure of Pontius Pilate than Yeshua (Christ). We have gone deep into his character by analyzing the remorse, the loneliness and the redemption that the character goes through. An important role in the study is that of the symbols interpreted in the novel's context such as the symbol of the moon, so oft and powerfully used in the novel. Because the author remade a well known character, we think that the author was aware that the reader would have a culture of imagining it, so it was a great challenge for him to give the reader another Pilate. Bulgakov is very talented in the way he describes Pilate so that the reader considering pre-knowledge about the biblical archetype makes an unconscious comparison.

We have been fascinated by how differently Bulgakov describes this well known figure, and it was necessary to understand what he aimed for by mak-

ing such a unique character. The Pilate of the novel represents a crossroad where the forces of light and darkness meet; he is special for us, for he is more human than all the other biblical characters that Bulgakov depicts.

Story Lines, the Integration of History to Pilate

The Master and Margarita was published in Moscow in 1967. However, Bulgakov wrote it in isolation until his death, from the years 1928-1940. There are many reasons that Bulgakov, in particular with the novel *The Master and Margarita*, constituted an external phenomenon to literature and the ideology of the time; but one of the reasons for the exclusion was the extension of the religious element in the novel. Socialist realist literature makes the disclosure of the clerical class necessary, or at least, not speaking of religious matters. In the first chapter of the novel, the editor Berlioz, in conversation with Woland (Satan), states, "Yes, we here do not believe in God. We can declare it publicly" (Bulgakov, 2005, 12).

The novel includes two story lines; one speaks of the real contemporary Moscow of the 1930's, and the other one speaks about Jerusalem in the beginning of the new era. In Moscow, the events are a consequence of strange events, or signs, which are due to the acts of Woland and his retinue, while the second line is about Pontius Pilate, the Roman judge who condemned Yeshua,¹ and the time is limited to just one day, the day of the execution of Yeshua. In both story lines, the religious element is the center of the story.

The novel *The Master and Margarita* is a product of western culture, the foundations of which are the Greco-Roman and Christian Culture. "Rome has been at the center of the universe followed by Catholicism along with the Protestant world" (Sadik, 2006, 336).

It is important to give value to the changes that Bulgakov makes with the Christian element by not making a dry comparison, but by proposing and understanding the reasons the author changed the myth and which conclusions he leads us to. We should try to understand how he perceives the powers that give life to existence and the rapports between Good and Evil, God and the devil, and the human nature.

Bulgakov not only takes elements from the Bible as they are, but he rebuilds the whole story by creating a version of his own. The main character of the novel within the novel, the novel that the character of The Master writes, is Pontius Pilate. Yeshua is not the Son of God; he has no mission, so therefore his divine

1 Yeshua ha Notzri - in the novel, the Aramaic phonetic version of the name we call as Jesus of Nazareth is used.

nature is excluded. These are significant changes that make the character develop beyond his biblical archetype². Yeshua in the novel is the representative of a philosophy that believes that all people are good. His immortality does not lie in the resurrection, but in the philosophy that he gives to the world. The history of Yeshua and Pilate is an incomplete history which ends with Pilate's meeting with the Master, a character of the 20th century, in the afterlife, where Pilate is condemned to immortality and still awaits a conversation with Yeshua.

However, the main character of the novel is Pontius Pilate. As the narration begins, we do not know the title of the novel because it has no real need for a title as it is always paraphrased as the novel about Pontius Pilate.

“The guest observed all around, scared. He continued: - A year ago I wrote a novel about Pontius Pilate” (Bulgakov, 2005, 142).

In his figure, we notice endless complications in relation to Yeshua: about how important Yeshua is to him, the conscience problems he has because of Yeshua's crucifixion, his sentence with immortality ban, and his salvation that does not come from the creator, nor from Yeshua, but from his real creator, the Master.

There are many narrators of this story, and this method of story-telling mixes people such as Margarita who is supposedly reading the pages of the novel, and Woland, the devil, who begins the story-telling of the last day of Yeshua which corresponds very oddly with the same words that the Master wrote. It is one story narrated by different characters, and even by the main narrator at the end, when the two story-lines come together in the afterlife, when the Master and Pontius Pilate meet to finally release Pilate from his curse. It is a mystery how Woland tells the story with the exact words the Master wrote; and much more mysterious is how the Master could have known what had happened two thousand years prior.

“-I have been myself there when these things happened, in all the episode I descript to you, - whispered the professor in a clear Russian, turning his head to all directions as he was feared from something, I was in the platform, in the balcony with Pontius Pilate, even in the garden where I talked to Kaifa, but in secret all the time” (Bulgakov, 2005, 46).

As a Historical Figure

Pontius Pilate was the Procurator of the Roman province of Judea, a Roman officer and vice regent of the Emperor. The Procurator was the highest authority

2 We use the term “archetype” with the meaning given by Northop Frye in the “Anatomy of Criticism”.

in the Roman province under orders of the Province General of Syria. Pilate's name may come from the Latin word that means "spear", or may come from "pila" which, according to the Catholic Encyclopedia, means "head slave", however, in this encyclopedia it is not accepted that Pilate came from a slave father. He appears in the Bible, and also in the apocryphal writings. Pilate emerges as a stubborn man, determined in his actions. Only the New Testament represents him as a hesitating person, willing to submit to the Jewish leaders and the crowd's pressure. This is how the release of Barabbas is explained: "And so Pilate, willing to satisfy the people, released Barabbas unto them, and delivered Jesus, when he had scourged him, to be crucified" (Mark 15:15 KJV).

However, an explanation for this discrepancy is possible. The Protector of Pilate in Rome was Sejanus who fell from power in the year 31 because he had been enmeshed in a plot against the Emperor. It is understood that in the year 33, the year when Jesus was executed, the position of Pilate was visibly insecure and he was set in a defensive position; he had to be careful because an appeal by the Jews could have cost him his head, as per the accusation that Jesus had appealed for a rebellion against Rome and its Emperor. These facts are supported by others, such as the Samaritans who complained about Pilate to the legate of Syria who returned them back to Rome. Pilate wanted to meet the Emperor Tiberius, to respond in front of him, but he died before Pilate arrived in Rome.

In the novel, the Procurator is shown in a defensive position; he can not object to the high priest, and cannot release Yeshua as innocent because of the charges against him. In the 26th chapter of Bulgakov's novel, it is said that Pilate was the son of an astrologer and his mother was the daughter of a miller, Pila. This data appears in several medieval legends about Pilate. A Manx legend recognizes Pilate as the son of an astrologer. Bulgakov might have received these facts from a Latin poem "Pilate" which was translated early into Russian, or even from a 15th century Russian work "Journey to Florence". In the Encyclopedia of the Catholic Church, it is claimed that these legends that existed in Germany have never had even the weakest authority.

The Character

In the novel, because of the genre, we can see Pilate's human dimension. The novel generates the character's experiences, his thoughts, and his conscience concerns. Pilate in the Bible is not the focus of the story; he takes only 20 knots in the Gospel according to Matthew, just as in Mark, 25 in Luke and 29 in John. In the novel, Pilate is the epicenter, and everything told in the novel has the function of portraying this main character. Even in the scenes with Yeshua, although the presentation of Yeshua is very interesting and so far removed from the Gospels,

the main aim is to show how the meeting affects Pilate.

The particular Bible passage which enables Bulgakov's interpretation is the image of Pilate washing his hands:

"When Pilate saw that he could prevail nothing, but that rather a tumult was made, he took water, and washed his hands before the multitude, saying, I am innocent of the blood of this just person: see ye to it" (Mathew 27:24 KJV).

We may say now that Bulgakov does not change the character; he only interprets it. He interprets his spiritual need for Yeshua, his conscience concerns, while Pilate becomes a real character with his spiritual world, his inner problems, his fear, revenge and regrets; he is closer to the human world, the dualism of our world.

In the Bible, Pilate appears static, unchanging as a character, whereas the novel's Pilate appears changeable, dynamic. All the events in the novel about Pontius Pilate take place within a day and night, and within this time, Pilate changes many times. At first, he was very ill, suffering from migraines so much that he would rather die than live.

"Why do you punish me this way, my God? What have I done to you?... This migraine, this migraine, is eating me little by little. My head is not mine. I know: I'm going to die, there's no medicine for me" (Bulgakov, 2005, 20).

After the sentencing of Yeshua, Pilate becomes a very active man, trying by all means to save Yeshua ha Notzri. The reason for Pilate's change is his conversation with Yeshua. To Jerusalem, Pilate is a cruel man and a monster, as he affirms himself to Yeshua while he calls Pilate "a good man". Pilate is a lonely man; he has no family, no friends and no person close to him. This is another change from the Bible because the Bible mentions that he had a wife, and she had a role in the plot; she had a disturbing dream and afterward she begged Pilate not to condemn Jesus because she believed in his innocence.

"When he was set down on the judgment seat, his wife sent unto him, saying, Have thou nothing to do with that just man: for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him" (Matthew 27:19).

In the novel, he is mentally and spiritually empty. From the beginning of the novel, it can be seen that he is empty, a man without a spiritual world, while we see that he hates a rose's fragrance above all things. The "rose" is a word that has many meanings in different cultural environments, both western and eastern. Umberto Eco, in the after-word of the novel *The Name of the Rose* avows that he used this title because the *rose* can have multiple meanings.

"A rose is a symbolic figure so compressed with meanings, almost as there is no longer any meaning in the mystical rose, and the rose lived as the roses live, the war of the two roses, a rose is a rose, is a rose, cross roses, thanks to the

wonderful rose fragrance, fresh rose. And so the reader shall loose the tracks, and afterwards the text will not have one meaning, but multiple meanings” (Eco, 1996, 454).

Pilate’s headache comes from his infertility. It is his inner emptiness from the spiritual life which is embodied in something concrete – the migraine that tortures him. Therefore, Yeshua is the only one who can heal his headache because he is the only one who is able to understand precisely what Pilate is suffering from.

“There’s nothing delightful in your life, you are close only to a dog. You are a spiritually impoverished procurator. Accept this fact, the prisoner said smiling” (Bulgakov, 2005, 27).

Yeshua not only understands what’s eating at the procurator, but he knows what can heal him so that he need not suffer further: “From now on you will not suffer anymore from the headache” (Bulgakov, 2005, 26).

He becomes close with Pilate; Pilate finds someone who understands him and he does not feel alone and barren anymore, for Yeshua is the opposite of emptiness. He is a man with a spiritual world because he is full of ideas and hope: he hopes the Kingdom of Truth is coming; he also stands for the idea that people are good, while Pilate does not believe in anything because he does not believe in people anymore.

“The problem is, continued the prisoner, - that being suspended made you to completely lose faith in people” (Bulgakov, 2005, 27).

His only friend is his dog, Banga, who resembles his master’s loneliness; they are quite an unfortunate pair. Pilate is restless and sleepless, calling his big dog who is intimidated by loud noises – a worried man and a scared dog. Pilate is the embodiment of those unfortunate people who Yeshua believes to be alienated because of their past life. There is no one close to Pilate. He is alone in a foreign country in a town he hates.

Jerusalem in Pilate’s View

Pilate hates the city of Jerusalem because there are too many celebrations, magicians, and prophets. He was so upset in Jerusalem that he swears to Afrani (the head priest) that he would do anything to get away from there.

“Excuse me, said the procurator smiling, - you can’t find in the whole world any place more unsafe than this. I’m not talking about climate. Every time I have to come here I get ill. And this isn’t the only bad thing. There are all these celebrations! All these magicians, these sorcerers, these miraculous, these groups of pilgrims... Fanatics! Fanatics!” (Bulgakov, 2005, 316).

Jerusalem in the Old and the New Testaments is defined as the chosen city, the city of God.

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn” (Isaiah 60:1-3).

The prophet Isaiah wrote such verses about the greatness of Jerusalem. Meanwhile, Pilate states his open hatred for the city he rules. The priest knows the hatred that the procurator has for Jerusalem, and this is one of the reasons for Yeshua’s punishment. Caiaphas (the head priest) believes that Pilate has the worst expectations for the city; he thinks Pilate wants Yeshua released to bring disaster to the town, so (the high priest) does not accept Yeshua’s release on the occasion of the Passover, but he takes a risk by releasing a dangerous criminal such as Bar-Rabbani.

“A man like you, who has deceived the people, cannot bring peace to Jerusalem. And this you realize very well, my knight! You have done everything possible for Ha-Notsri to escape the death! So why is it? Through him, you want to see our people suffer, to profane their religion under Roman sword!” (Bulgakov, 2005, 40).

Pilate, the Antipode of Yeshua

In a city where Pilate is a stranger and hates everybody, and everybody knows this, he cannot be loved except for by a man who thinks that bad people do not exist. Pilate is a man with a critical eye. Mark the rat slayer, who Yeshua calls a good man as the result of a syllogism, Pilate calls a sadist although Yeshua had just explained that people who are made tough by their circumstances are even more unfortunate. Pilate thinks Judah is a traitor, while Yeshua excuses him with the argument that it was not Judah’s intention to harm him.

“You call me ‘good people,’ such persons as Mark, who is but a sadist and compulsive torturer, you’re calling good people those who brought you in this condition, - procurator said, pointing with the finger the burnt face of Yeshua, you call me good people those who drubbed you just for your thoughts! And you even call a good man that traitor, Judah!” (Bulgakov, 2005, 33).

Yeshua does not have any feelings of revenge against Judah, and it is logical because it is the opposite of his theory; but Pilate felt revenge from the first time he heard about Judah. In the meeting with the priest, he admits that Judah would have no time to repent if he came into Herod’s palace since at that moment Pilate

decided to retaliate against Judah.

“The garden is surrounded, as well as the palace, and not only a man, but even a fly cannot enter in here, even that one from Kerioth, whom you know very well, thou head priest. How he would repent if he showed up here!” (Bulgakov, 2005, 38).

Pilate is not a utopian figure like Yeshua. He yells at Yeshua that the Kingdom of Truth will not come with the same force he that he yelled in the battle of the Virgins.

Yeshua understands Pilate even more than a close person would do; their conversation makes this known. Although initially Yeshua was scared, afterward he speaks courageously to the procurator about personal issues despite the hot-tempered fame of the interlocutor. This courage comes to Yeshua because he is sure that is saying the truth. Pilate knows that the loss of Yeshua would mean condemnation, even for himself. He thinks not to punish, but to imprison him in a place near his residence, to have him somewhere near. Yeshua shows affinity, and he advises Pilate that it would be better to go for a walk together to entrust him with some new ideas. It is like both of them have been looking for each other for a long time. After Yeshua's death, Pilate misses his company so much that he cannot be himself anymore.

“In the early morning it was clear to him that something had escaped from his hands, beyond reclaim, and what escaped from his hands, he was now in vain trying to replace with some not very important and latecomer sentences” (Bulgakov, 2005, 323).

However, they are opposite characters, and they think the opposite about every topic. Through them are exemplified the spiritual life and emptiness, confidence in the future and disbelief, on the one hand, kindness, forgiveness, faith, and on the other hand revenge, severity, doubt.

Remorse of the Conscience

Why did Pilate make all these efforts for a person so different from him, different in what he represents in ideas and intentions? Why all this effort for an institutionally convicted person? Pilate was on duty, and was in line with the law, so why should he make all these efforts for Yeshua?

Pilate knew that Yeshua was innocent, and he feels guilty for his punishment. He realized that Yeshua had never wanted to call the people to break down the temple of Jerusalem. And he had nothing against the Emperor in particular when he said that the powers we know will one day be overthrown. From the first moment, Pilate felt the ambivalence between legal and moral rights: to punish Ye-

shua or to release him. Law and care for himself commanded, "Punish him!" But deep in his conscience, another Pilate knows Yeshua is innocent, and his conviction would bring serious consequences. Remorse is the most severe consequence that Pilate will have from Yeshua's sentence to death.

"As his face seemed cheerless, the procurator tried to understand the source of his spiritual suffering. And this he quickly spotted, but he tried to lie himself. [...] The procurator was trying to convince himself that his current actions were equally valuable as the sentences made in the morning." (Bulgakov, 2005, 323).

The scene that best represents his disturbed conscience is when Pilate is laying in bed with his dog and being tortured by the light of the moon which does not forgive. Pilate feels sorry for the murder of Yeshua because there was congeniality between them. In a conversation with Levi Matthew, he tells Levi that Judah would have been killed by some fan of Yeshua, and later claimed that it was he himself who had ordered the murder of Judah; so he was a worshiper of Yeshua (Bulgakov, 2005, 344).

The intimation of Pilate's guilt in the Bible is represented by his significant gesture of washing his hands. We can see a big extension of this matter in the novel as well as the actualization of it in the context where Bulgakov wrote the novel.

What Does Pilate Represent?

It seems like the antagonism that Yeshua and Pilate represent could be generalized to the level of Good - Evil. But it is not so because the characters may think opposite things, but they do not represent opposite things. Yeshua is a representative of good faith, but Pilate is not evil. Woland is the force which brings equilibrium to Yeshua, even if Pilate has a difficult character, is tough, irascible, cruel and everyone considers him to be a monster. He also contrasts with Yeshua because he appears suspicious, vindictive, pessimist, and aimless. And precisely because of these qualities, he is unfortunate. He is alone, exhausted from an illness and wishing for his death. His life has nothing good or beautiful, nothing worth fighting for; the future reserves nothing, and his life has no purpose. On the other hand, he does not intend to do bad. He does not really want to ruin Jerusalem, but he just does not fit with this colorful, noisy and strange city. He can distinguish the good from the evil, and his revenge to punish the evil satisfies the reader's thirst for justice.

Pilate is the crossroad where Good and Evil meet. This is an explanation of why he is the central character of the novel. He is a human with no supernatural

nature, where the principles are confused. He is neither God nor the devil; he is a man, and it is normal for him to have such a nature. Even his connection with Yeshua can be explained in this way: he is connected with Yeshua because the philosophy he represents is the opposite of Yeshua's.

“They talked about an important and confusing issue and none of interlocutors could overcome the other. They agreed nothing with each other, so their conversation would be interesting and endless” (Bulgakov, 2005, 332).

The Condemnation of Eternal Life and the Forgiveness

After Yeshua's condemnation, Pilate suffers and his conscience cannot be quiet; he is always concerned. Pilate could not forgive himself for having convicted an innocent man. We understand this by his wakefulness. He develops two Pilates within him, with two personalities which are controversial. The first Pilate is the Procurator, the soldier, who fought in the Valley of the Virgins; this is Pilate that says that Yeshua had committed a crime against Caesar and had no reason to sacrifice his career for him. The second Pilate has a conscience that tells him that the truth and righteousness are the most important things.

“-Yes, you had to sacrifice your career. In the morning, he could not sacrifice, but now, in the night he is sure of the opposite. He would take into consideration all the consequences, only to save the mad philosopher from his execution, because he was absolutely innocent” (Bulgakov, 2005, 251).

For this unjust sentence, Pilate is doomed to suffer spiritually for an immeasurable time: forever. At his first meeting with Yeshua, we can notice a prolapse in the text, as Pilate is terrified for a moment just because of the idea of eternity.

“At this moment he had a vision of immortality, which infuriated and weakened him a lot” (Bulgakov, 2005, 31).

Such a moment gets repeated even more painfully:

“Immortality ... the immortality came ... Whose was this immortality, which had come? The procurator could not understand this. Reflection on the mystery of immortality made the Procurator tremble” (Bulgakov, 2005, 37).

The scene with his dog in the bed next to the procurator who is suffering from moonlight will be retaken from the narrator in the end of the subject: in another world. We find Pilate in the same condition, unforgiven, because the right person to give him freedom from his suffering, the Master, is not shown yet.

His conviction to suffer under the full moon links us with mysteries and symbolism from medieval times. The moon is the most significant symbol in the

novel. But the moon was not made into a symbol by Bulgakov; it has existed as a symbol since pagan times, and appears in almost all cultures, but it is the full moon that contains more occult meanings. On full moon nights, all wizards gathered, and the witches had their time of their practices. There are still groups that collect for the full moon ritual. Their core course is pagan, and mainly they worship the female goddesses. In Bulgakov's novel, the light of the moon acts as a celestial eye that sees everything from above; nothing escapes from him. Thus is explained the torment of Pontius Pilate by moonlight. That is why even beyond life the moonlight continues to torture Pilate even in the afterlife.

“He repeats the same thing, - Woland's voice was heard. -He says that even in the moonlight he doesn't feel calm and that he has a bad duty” (Bulgakov, 2005, 398).

The same thing happens when the eternal moonlight touches the characters of Woland's suite. The moon's ability to penetrate the human soul reveals the real demons behind the masked characters.

In the last chapter, during the last flight for the hereafter, Woland's suite and the Master and Margarita find Pilate located in a country full of mountains and abysses. They approach Pilate, but he can not understand anything because he could understand nothing but his worries. Perhaps the man was deaf, as he dived deep into his thoughts. Pilate is stuck in time; only the Master, his “creator”, could release him from eternal life. The Master finished his novel with the phrase:

“He is free! Free! He is waiting for you! (Yeshua) – Then the mountains transformed Master's voice into thunder, and the same thunder destroyed the mountains” (Bulgakov, 2005, 399).

The Master plays a demure role, as every writer does with his creation, but even he could not be free from his character until this moment. The incarnation of the real Pilate is another issue to be discussed. But in the whole story, what is important is that beyond the characters of supernatural power, the characters of biblical and non biblical models, there is one character who escapes his model by representing a real man, a man of this world where good and evil meet and mix together. Bulgakov exemplified this in a biblical character.

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Lik Poncija Pilata u Bulgakovljevu romanu "Majstor i Margarita" uspoređen s Biblijom

Sažetak

Proučavanje romana "Majstor i Margarita" fokusirano je na tumačenju i realiziranju lika kojega je Bulgakov stvorio na temelju biblijske osobe. U analizi koristi komparativnu metodu, a u proučavanju je integrirana duboka usporedba s pripovjedačkim tehnikama i tumačenjima lika u svjetlu mistične i okultne kulture. Usporedba između biblijskog arhetipa lika Poncije Pilata i preoblikovanja i tumačenja lika u romanu nije samo suhoparna usporedba, već nastoji nadići kulturu koju predstavlja, kršćansku kulturu i etiku o konceptu dobra i zla. Budući

da je pripovjedač u romanu fokusiran na nekoliko različitih značajki teme, a i drukčije predstavlja središte pripovijedanja, važnije nam je bilo proučiti lik Poncija Pilata nego Ješue (Krista). Lik je dublje proučen analizom kajanja, usamljenosti i iskupljenja kroz koja prolazi. Važnu ulogu u proučavanju imaju simboli koji se tumače u kontekstu romana, kao što je simbol mjesečine, toliko često i snažno korištenog u romanu. Ponovno stvaranje dobro poznatog lika navodi nas da pomislimo kako je autor bio svjestan da čitatelj posjeduje kulturu zamišljanja tog lika, stoga je velik izazov za autora ponuditi čitatelju drugoga Pilata. U svakom slučaju, Bulgakov je vrlo talentiran u načinu opisivanja Pilata, tako da čitatelj koji uzima u obzir znanje o biblijskom arhetipu podsvjesno čini svoju usporedbu.

Fascinira način na koji Bulgakov sasvim drukčije opisuje ovaj vrlo poznati lik, stoga je bilo neophodno shvatiti što je namjeravao nudeći nam tako poseban lik. Pilat iz romana predstavlja razmeđe na kojemu se spajaju sile svjetla i tame; on je za nas poseban, jer je ljudskiji od ostalih likova koje Bulgakov obrađuje.