

Venality

Using a combination of humor and thinly veiled satire Mikhail Bulgakov criticized communists, Stalin, and the Soviet Union with bitter and biting wit. Not surprisingly, by the late 1920s and 1930s Bulgakov was banned as a novelist in the USSR. Written over the course of a decade, during the time of the Great Terror, the manuscript for *The Master and Margarita* was written in secret and then partially burned by Bulgakov himself. However, the novel survived. It was rewritten, revised, and then posthumously published by his wife in 1966. *The Master and Margarita*, one of the most influential works of the twentieth century, was Bulgakov's definitive masterpiece. The novel analyzed the moral corruption of Soviet citizens during the time of Stalin.

The Master and Margarita's dark satire shows how venality can be a contagious disease, a source of moral vulnerability that can be manipulated by a political leader to assert power over individuals and society. Bulgakov's iconic and Satan-like character, Woland, a professor of black magic and a conjurer of illusions and deception, manipulates the other characters in the novel by twisting their ideas and dreams, distorting and weakening their convictions. Somewhat reflective of certain contemporary leaders, Woland, is a courteous, dazzling and mysterious figure. As they believe that he has the power to magically improve their material circumstances, people begin to put their faith in Woland. He commands the attention of the city of Moscow through a combination of mischief and showmanship. Woland spins reality by showing people enticing dreams. By making people doubt their own abilities, he convinces them that he alone can fulfill all their dreams and desires. We ourselves create powerful leaders by refusing to believe in our own abilities and power.

Targeting the Soviet literary and artistic establishment, Woland and his troupe of villainous assistants exploit the corruption that exists within the bureaucratic leadership of these institutions. He tempts individuals to commit to acts of venality and corruption, and later punishes them for their sins of perjury, pridefulness, and greed. In a memorable scene from the novel, a "séance of black magic" is held at the Variety Theatre where free money and elegant foreign clothing conjured from air rains down upon a bemused audience. Beguiling the citizens to participate in his orgy of materialism and depravity, Woland unmasks the corruption, hypocrisy, and the capitalist greed that lies within Soviet society. When his gifts disappear, the citizens find that dishonesty is at the core of the communist society. Communism is an illusion that they have chosen to believe in. Woland's actions create a world of bewildering anarchy and fear where the people seduced by his chicanery, willingly succumb to his authority.

What is the nature of the leaders we choose to put our faith in and how are influential figures able to take command of populations? Woland does not need to seize control of the citizens of Moscow, the corruption that exists in their lives, feeds into the ability to be easily controlled and deceived by a persuasive leader. The devil that the characters confront is a reflection of the devil inside themselves. Do authoritarian regimes take power or are we mesmerized to give our consent freely? One could say that the most effective authoritarian leader uses a fair amount of trickery and corruption to assume control; however, what does authoritarianism look like? Perhaps it looks like us. It could reflect our own selves in society and one must be careful about the image that we broadcast to the world.

"You cannot stop the devil, only the men performing his work." - Unknown