

(18 Sept 2026)

I finished *The Master and Margarita* last night. My initial rating is a solid 8 out of 10, though its themes and style are gnawing at me, and its importance grows as I read more about the historical context. The 50th anniversary edition has an introduction with lots of spoilers but was good to read after finishing with the book. (I have found in recent years that it's almost always best to avoid reading introductions until afterwards.) This edition has a lot of helpful endnotes for understanding the historical and cultural context of 1930s Russia. The endnotes also explain to secular readers how the segments from first-century Jerusalem divert significantly from the accounts in the canonical Gospels.

The vaudevillian slapstick was a bit much in places – though, like generations of readers, I enjoyed the cat Behemoth, who is the funniest and most likeable member of the demonic entourage. In some places, Margarita's exploits brought to mind the wacky witch movies I saw as a kid in the 1970s and 80s. As usual in Russian lit, the proliferation of names gets confusing – Ivan Nikolayevich and Nikolai Ivanovich, for starters – but in this case, keeping track of the minor characters is not necessary to follow the plot.

For me, the most interesting problem is trying to figure out exactly how heretical the book's metaphysical frame is. On the one hand, the devil himself, as Woland, argues eloquently in the book – by his very appearance and through his words – against the official and much-promoted atheism of the Soviet state. On the other hand, the book departs from the Christology and demonology of the Gospels in major ways that are irreconcilable with orthodoxy.

Woland declares the (eternal?) necessity of evil in a key quotation, addressing the (presumably resurrected) apostle Matthew Levi: “What would your good be doing if there were no evil, and what would the earth look like if the shadows disappeared from it? After all, shadows are cast by objects and people. There is the shadow of my sword. But there are also shadows of trees and living creatures. Would you like to denude the earth of all the trees and all the living beings in order to satisfy your fantasy of rejoicing in the naked light?” Elsewhere, among the many allusions to *Faust*, are echoes of the way Goethe has the devil introduce himself: “I am part of that power which eternally wills evil and eternally works good.”

The idea of the devil ultimately serving goodness – and thus (unwillingly) subservient to God – is sprinkled in various places in

The Master and Margarita. By itself, that idea is not necessarily heretical (for more, read the *Book of Job*). God, after all, is ultimately sovereign over everything in the universe. But the idea is muddled in the book. For example, Yeshua *asks* Woland (through Matthew) to send some of the human characters on various not-hell afterlife trajectories. Yeshua does not *command* these things, as an orthodox view of Final Judgment would suggest. (Regarding the not-hell but also not-traditional-Heaven trajectories, I'm inclined to cut Bulgakov a lot of slack, given my own difficulties in my fiction and my devotions to come close to imagining what Heaven will be like.)

Although these lines of speculation are interesting, I would certainly **not** suggest that the reader (or the non-reader, for that matter) be lulled by an entertaining portrayal into having “sympathy for the devil.” If you think there’s any chance (I regard it as a certainty) that an entity may in fact be the enemy of mankind and may seek the torment and destruction of your soul, you shouldn’t mess with it in any way. Cling to God and goodness (in Christ) and don’t let go.