

Excavating Counter-Humanistic Discourses Through Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1967)

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Abstract

Humanism is an anthropocentric discourse that weaves a narrative of progress and happiness around an essentialist construct of being human. Since all discourses are historical in nature, this study aims at analyzing humanism as a historical discourse that was dominant in the 20th century modern era and legitimized an exclusionary definition of being human. Furthermore, this study aims to reveal that humanism's essentialism dehumanizes and alienates people by making them conform to rigid standards of thought and behavior that it posits as universal and absolute. For this purpose, the selected text *The Master and Margarita* (1967) by Mikhail Bulgakov is taken as representative of the modern episteme wherein humanism was the

dominant discourse and therefore dehumanized several characters. To reveal the historicity of humanism, the study utilizes Michel Foucault's archaeology for undertaking an archaeological analysis of humanist discourses throughout the text. An archaeological analysis of discourses analyzes and makes evaluative claims regarding discourses as products of their historical time periods rather than having a universal essence. To supplement archaeological analysis, the research utilizes textual analysis as the research methodology to study and analyze humanist discourses and excavate counter-humanistic discourses from the text. Finally, the study posits supernatural discourses as counter-humanist discourses with the potential to rehumanize historically dehumanized characters within the selected text.

Keywords: archaeology, counter-humanism, discourse, The Master and Margarita, dehumanization

1. Introduction

As an introduction to my paper, I argue that humanism is an essentialist and anthropocentric ideological world view that dehumanizes and alienates people by making people conform to a rigid standard of humanness. Therefore, humanism should be studied in the historical context in which it arose for critical analysis. The reason being, that a historical study of humanist discourse presents humanism as the product of a particular historical time period. Resultantly, this historicization deconstructs the universal essentialism (what is the most essential feature of being a human) of humanism and the narrative of progress and happiness weaved around such a version of being human. In this way, considerable space is created for alternative or counter-humanist discourses to emerge for re-humanization of individuals who feel dehumanized by such a historical standard.

Through the text I have selected as representative of the modern episteme, I will show how humanism's historical construct of being human and the narratives of a progressive and happy life weaved around such a historical construct of humanity alienated and dehumanized

several characters. I will also show how a counter-humanist reading of the text utilizing Michel Foucault's archaeological analysis of discourse highlighted counter-humanist discourses. These excavated counter-humanist discourses proved helpful in rehumanizing the historically dehumanized character, utilizing the same epistemic standard of knowledge that legitimized humanism as true and real.

To begin with, humanism is an anthropocentric worldview. Anthropocentrism means a human-centered ideology that makes the human being the measure of everything in the universe.¹ By this worldview, the existence and value of any entity, whether abstract (mental ideas & concepts) or physical (any material) is measured through human perception (e.g. humans cannot perceive the supernatural therefore the supernatural does not exist) and value (the most intelligent species possesses inherent value). Anthropocentrism, therefore, means that "humans alone possess intrinsic value" whereas everything else, including plants, animals, insects, ideas, cultural traditions, technology, etc., possess merely "instrumental value" as tools for the benefit of human beings.²

In light of the above-established context, humanism as anthropocentrism becomes problematic. If only the human being has intrinsic value and all non-human entities possess mere instrumental value, then the historical definition of what characterizes a human being becomes an issue of major concern.

With the power to define what a human being at a particular time in history is and weave narratives of progress and happiness around that historical construct, humanism excludes a vast number of peoples as non-humans who do not subscribe to such a standard of humanity. Perhaps no other example is more suitable than that of settler-colonialism here. Settler-colonial violence, especially that exacted on Native Americans, Australian aboriginals

¹ Goralink, L & Nelson M. P. "Anthropocentrism" in *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics (Second Edition)*, ed. Ruth Chadwick (Academic Press, 2012), 145.

² Goralink and Nelson, "Anthropocentrism," 145.

and ongoing against Palestinians, is premised on the “erasure” of the natives by “European” occupiers.³ However, erasure and genocide are justified by colonial attempts at “dehumanization” which involves defining natives in terms of what Lauren Eichler calls “nonhuman animals” in her PhD dissertation (Eichler iv).⁴ And among other conditions, settler-colonialism and colonialism were historical conditions in which humanism emerged as a dominant discourse in post-15th century Europe.

Since humanism in its historical formulation of modern humanism cognitively conditioned people to conform to a limited definition of being human, it resulted in widespread dehumanization and alienation. Those who subscribed to such a historical definition automatically derived legitimacy and therefore power. Those who did not subscribe to such a standard were dehumanized, as a “madman” in the master’s case, and an ungrateful superstitious “witch” in Margarita’s case.⁵

Therefore, as I will show in the analysis part, in the selected text, supernatural figures arose to help rehumanize the historically dehumanized characters. In *The Master and Margarita* (1967), Satan and his supernatural gang landed in Moscow to rehumanize the Muscovites, the protagonists, the master and Margarita, and a major character, Ivan Nikolaevich. I will also explain that the supernatural figures of Satan and his gang exploited the same standard of knowledge in the modern episteme to rehumanize historically dehumanized individuals. The reason that the supernatural figures had to use the same knowledge standards has to do with the episteme and the standard of knowledge it sets in a historical time period. This is what Foucault calls “constraints” on one’s thought and applies

³Patrick Wolfe. “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native.” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 389. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623520601056240>

⁴Lauren Eichler, *Dehumanization and the Metaphysics of Genocide: A New Theory for Genocide Prevention* (PhD diss., University of Oregon, 2019), iv,

⁵Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, trans. Richard Pevear (Penguin Classics; Penguin Books, 2007), 70, 266.

to everyone, the ruling and subjugated classes alike.⁶ In order to be taken seriously, one has to logically argue from the evidence of one's five senses (called empiricism) in an episteme that legitimizes an empirical standard of knowledge/truth. As the standard of knowledge/truth is utilized to dehumanize, it can also be utilized to rehumanize.

Next, I will briefly introduce what I mean by counter-humanist discourses. Counter-humanism is any discourse or group of discourses that have the potential to rehumanize all those people(s) that humanist discourses dehumanize through their essentialist historical construct of humanness. As mentioned earlier, humanism's essentialism is exclusivist therefore it excludes numerous peoples as non-human who become merely tools with instrumental value for those authority figures who subscribe to humanism's essentialism. Since humanist discourses, whether in the Renaissance, Enlightenment, or Modern epistemes utilize the epistemic standards of knowledge for articulation, counter-humanist discourses also utilize the same epistemic standard of knowledge for their articulation and rehumanization of historically dehumanized characters. Within this context, I theorize in the paper that counter humanism is not a specific discourse rather any discourse or group of discourses that rehumanize all those peoples that humanism dehumanizes and alienates in a specific historical time period.

Additionally, as relevant examples, feminism and postcolonialism can be taken as counter-humanist discourses as both attempt to rehumanize historically dehumanized people whom humanism's patriarchal and colonial essentialism of humanness dehumanizes as inferior or savage. Both feminism and postcolonialism in resisting the exclusivist patriarchal and colonialist human constructs of humanism and offering alternative and inclusive constructs of humanness take on the essence of counter-humanist discourses. Although counter-humanist discourses also essentialize what it means to be human, the elementary

⁶ Gary Gutting, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 17.

values counter-humanist discourses take for-granted are freedom, honor, and dignity which are neither gendered nor exclusionary in any way. Rather these fundamental values are essential to everyone living as respectable and free human beings regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, religion, nationality or any other affiliation. Hence, counter-humanist discourses are an inclusive alternative to humanism's historical essentialism that arose in exclusive material conditions and that attempt to create a humanizing space so everyone can live free and dignified lives equally.

Before concluding the introduction, I will briefly comment on the reason I chose supernatural figures to counter the dehumanizing effects of humanism. Supernatural figures by their very nature exist outside human history. The political, economic, and discursive forces of human history do not constrain them. Therefore, in *The Master and Margarita* (1967) as representative of the modern episteme, the supernatural figures of Satan and his gang, in benefitting from their ahistorical or transcendental (transcends man-made historical structures) status, exploit historical standards of knowledge to not only counter the dehumanizing effects of humanism, but also to rehumanize historically dehumanized individuals.

As far as the method of research is concerned, the current research involves textual analysis of the selected text, namely, *The Master and Margarita* (1967) by Mikhail Bulgakov. *The Master and Margarita* (1967) is chosen as the primary text for the current research. The secondary sources consulted to facilitate the research involve research articles, books, online blogs, and dissertations centered on the topic.

Furthermore, the reason the current research prefers textual analysis is that textual analysis of the primary text supplements archaeological analysis of the discourses found within the text. Meaning, textual analysis enables researchers to study and analyze the selected text as representative of the historical time periods of their origin (or their

epistemes). In this way, a textual analysis of the primary text (as representative of its historical time period) supplements an archaeological analysis of the humanist discourses within the texts.

1.1. Theoretical Perspective

The theoretical perspective that I use to read and analyze the primary text is archaeology. Michel Foucault formulated his archaeological method of studying discourses in his *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969). The method involves analyzing discourses by locating them in their historical context. Archaeology looks at texts as historical archaeological sites from where discourses can be excavated. Throughout his studies, Foucault's focus has not just been on any discourses, but rather exclusionary discourses that create hierarchical relationships in human society in terms of privileged/under-privileged binaries.

Furthermore, Foucault's major focus has been on the classical episteme in Europe from 1650 to 1800. He has been particularly interested in the way the discourses of sexuality, madness, psychiatry and criminality that the classical episteme legitimized through its standard of knowledge – scientific rationality – conditioned modern (humanist) individuals to have exclusionary beliefs and values.

The goal of all these historical discourses was for Foucault to discipline the human body which is an economic tool for the needs of modern capitalist states. Archaeology thus reads texts as representative of different historical time periods (the context), also called epistemes, in order to excavate dominant and exclusionary discourses (that are presented as universally true). It then studies the anatomical makeup of these discourses, that is who is the authority-figure, what concepts are used to define the object, and what strategies are formulated to manage/control that object.

In studying all the individual components of discourse, the underlying epistemic rules are brought to light that go unnoticed and condition people's conscious and unconscious beliefs. Doing so, archaeology lays bare the artificial construction of historical discourses which are hailed as absolute truths in their respective epistemes. Resultantly, archaeology also opens a way forward for inclusive discourses to arise that utilize the same epistemic standard of knowledge to counter the dehumanizing effects of dominant discourses.

1.2. Review of Relevant Literature

The following is an evaluative study of literature relevant to the key concept, namely counter-humanism and the text selected for the current thesis. Firstly, I will explore the origins of counter-humanism along with the way counter-humanism has already been treated in academia. Next, I will review relevant literature pertaining to the primary text, namely, *The Master and Margarita* (1967). This will help readers appreciate the reason behind this research that sufficient gap in prior research exists considering the selected text for it to be read through a counter-humanist perspective utilizing Michel Foucault's archaeology.

To begin with, counter-humanism can be defined as any historical discourse that counters humanism's essentialism and the narrative of a virtuous, meaningful, and progressive life surrounding such an essentialist construct. Counter-humanism is not a specific discourse such as feminist discourse or postcolonial discourse. However, both feminist and postcolonial discourses can be counter humanist discourses as both resist the dehumanizing essentialism of humanism which is both a patriarchal and colonial discourse as well. Counter-humanism therefore is not an exclusive discourse(s), rather an inclusive alternative to Western humanism's exclusive essentialism. Sources however are scarce when it comes to a google search for counter-humanism as a key word. There was a total of four sources that I found and review hereunder.

Counter-humanism as a term was first used by Aime Césaire, a black postcolonial playwright, poet, essayist, and politician in his *Discourse On Colonialism* (1950). In his Marxist essay, Césaire locates the colonial origins of humanism. Césaire argues the humanism justified colonialism by denying the humanity of the colonized and instead dehumanized them through racial constructs of savages, uncivilized, barbaric and so forth. This leads Césaire to debunk the myth of the benevolent civilizing mission of the European “humanist” colonizers who wanted to rid the world of uncivilized and un-Christianized “savages” (314).⁷ Moving on, Césaire claims that the colonizers themselves were savages as they belong to a “civilization which justifies colonization” and such a civilization is “a sick civilization, a civilization which is morally diseased” (322).⁸ At the end of his essay, Césaire calls for an inclusive and alternative “humanism made to the measure of the world” that opposes the historical essentialism of Western colonial humanism (336).⁹ Césaire’s hope is that such an alternative or counterhumanism would not project a colonial and white supremacist anthropocentric world view. Rather it would include human individuals of all races, ethnicities, religions, and genders as part of a single human community and weave a narrative of sustainable progress through mutual cooperation rather than exploitation of one group by the other.

Moving on, another google search result presents Richard Pithouse’s essay *Being Human After 1492* (2020). Like Césaire, Pithouse also calls humanism a racist, gendered, colonial, and overall exclusionary discursive practice, and locates its exclusionary essentialism in the historical emergence of Christianity as not only a religious but also a political discourse. Pithouse claims that by combining European nationalism and the Christian faith in the colonial era, the church excluded all non-Christians “from the count of

⁷ Aimé Césaire, "Discourse on Colonialism," in *Postcolonialism*, ed. Diana Brydon (Routledge, 2023), 314.

⁸ Césaire, "Discourse on Colonialism," 322.

⁹ Césaire, "Discourse on Colonialism," 336.

the fully human” (8).¹⁰ Pithouse exemplifies that when colonial monarchs all around Europe sent colonial missions abroad, the Church issued edicts to those monarchs that sanctified their exploitative missions as a civilizing and Christianizing mission for non-Christian and therefore, non-human savages. Lastly, Pithouse argues that gradually humanism’s essentialist exclusion “began to move from claims made in the name of religion to claims made in the name of science” and in his essay he traces how this transformation from religious dehumanization to secular dehumanization occurred (8).¹¹

At the end of his essay, like Aime Cesaire whose works Pithouse cites generously, Pithouse also calls for an inclusive “counter-humanism” that incorporates all those values as human too that help people live free, honorable, and dignified lives (34).¹² What those values are that dignify people, Pithouse does not propose them. From Pithouse’s avoidance of any essentialist comment that lays out what features define what a human truly is, it is clear that counter-humanism does not essentialize what specific historical qualities define humanity like humanism. However, in this research, I theorize that to counter humanist essentialism’s historical dehumanization, some elementary values such as freedom, dignity, and honor do need to be taken for granted or essentialized as human values. In this way, counter-humanism can also be called an (or a group of) essentialist discourse(s). Notwithstanding, a close analysis reveals that the elementary values I propose should be taken for granted as counter-humanist values are neither gendered, nor exclusionary.

I make the above-mentioned claim by evaluating another source which is a transcribed interview of Sylvia Winter on the *Internet Archive*, a respected online resource for books and journal articles. Sylvia Winter is a renowned Jamaican writer who is famous for writing against western colonialism and the various discourses that legitimized it and still

¹⁰Richard Pithouse, *Being Human After 1492* (Daraja Press, 2020), 8.

¹¹ Pithouse, *Being Human After 1492*, 8.

¹²Pithouse, *Being Human After 1492*, 34.

present it in a nostalgic light. In her interview Sylvia Winter calls for a “counter-humanism” through which one does not just “constitute [oneself] as another [historical] subject” or “this or that genre of the human, but also as human” (1).¹³ Therefore, as evidenced from Cesaire, Pithouse, and Winter, humanism is an exclusionary discourse that emerged under the historical conditions of colonial exploitation and subjugation.

Furthermore, it is also clear that like Pithouse, Winter too assumes some fundamental values are to be taken as granted when she talks about a human being empty of all historical “genres” of humanness (which I argue humanism legitimized for centuries beginning from the renaissance to the modern episteme) (1).¹⁴ Therefore, I propose that in talking about humans, a certain essentialism, as in the case of counter-humanism, is necessary. However, like humanism, the elementary values that counter-humanism posits such as freedom, dignity, and honor are neither gendered, nor exclusive. Rather such values are inclusive and necessary for creating cultural spaces for alternative or rehumanizing discourses to arise.

Finally, the fourth source is authored by Ronald Knowles and offers a counter-humanist study of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (1601). For Knowles, Hamlet’s attempt at producing a counter humanist discourse stems from his painful consciousness of his historical humanist subjectivity. That is, Hamlet is conscious of the dominance of rationality in his subjectivity and therefore he feels alienated and dehumanized. Knowles proposes that to be rational during the renaissance meant downplaying emotions as both Christianity and the influence of Greek stoicism (rationalism) depreciated passion (1046).¹⁵ Instead of reacting emotionally at a time of grief, men had to exhibit a nonchalance toward the situation causing grief or pain. The titular hero experiences pessimism as he cannot escape his historical self, and that agony

¹³Sylvia Wynter, "The Re-Enchantment of Humanism: An Interview with Sylvia Wynter," interview by David Scott, *Internet Archive*, September 24, 2018, 1.

¹⁴ Wynter, "Re-Enchantment of Humanism," 1.

¹⁵ Ronald Knowles, "Hamlet and Counter-Humanism," *Renaissance Quarterly* 52, no. 4 (1999): 1046.

is voiced through his unique soliloquies as discourses of special reason or madness (Knowles 1048).¹⁶

To substantiate his claim, Knowles argues that although Hamlet is grieved at the murder of his father and his mother's betrayal of his father's memory, he cannot voice his uniquely personal and passionate grief other than in the "depersonalized ... public modality of logic and rhetoric" (Knowles 1048).¹⁷ Even when he does try to mourn his loss, what is uniquely and humanly felt as Hamlet's sorrow is labelled "unmanly grief" by the internalized external linguistic structure (Shakespeare 9).¹⁸ This means that rather than grieving his predicaments as emotional outbursts, or even isolating himself for a period of mourning, Hamlet is forced to subjectively confront and verbalize his grief within the rationalist discourses of humanism. All in all, Knowles sees Hamlet's philosophical soliloquies as attempts to produce a personalized counter humanist discourse through which he can express his human grief and still be considered masculine enough.

As for research gap with reference to Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1967), the following paragraphs will analyze whether Bulgakov's novel has already been analyzed from a counter-humanist perspective or not. *The Master and Margarita* (1967) is a philosophical and satirical text that was published twenty-six years after Bulgakov's death. The story revolves around two interwoven plots, some major characters, and several minor characters. One plot takes place in Stalinist Moscow, "the other in ancient Jerusalem" (Bulgakov xiv).¹⁹ The central characters are an unnamed writer, the master (who is incarcerated for writing a novel on a banned subject, i.e., theology in atheistic USSR), and

¹⁶ Knowles, "Hamlet and Counter-Humanism," 1048.

¹⁷ Knowles, "Hamlet and Counter-Humanism," 1048.

¹⁸ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* (Penguin Classics, 2015), 9.

¹⁹ Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, trans. Richard Pevear (Penguin Classics; Penguin Books, 2007), xiv.

Satan (Bulgakov xi).²⁰ Under the guise of a German Professor, Woland, Satan comes to Russia to expose its peoples' follies, their corruption, and their petty priorities, besides creating mischief with the help of his supernatural retinue.

The Jerusalem story revolves around Christ and Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea who presided over the trial of Christ and under pressure from Jewish authorities, ordered his crucifixion. At the end of the novel, the two stories intertwine and are resolved when both the master and his character, Pontius Pilate find peace in eternity with Jesus Christ. The novel has been diversely studied with Weir (iii)²¹ exploring the novel's autobiographical elements, Vanhellemont and Begijnhof (66)²² analyzing the portrayal of mental illness and Reif (59-62)²³ exploring totalitarianism and Stalinism in Bulgakov's Russia. Even so, the novel has not been treated extensively in terms of humanism.

As a form of humanism, Domanico explores the feminist aspect of counter-humanism in *The Master and Margarita* (1967). The author highlights the role of Margarita, the master's wife, in subverting the authority of humanist "man" in Stalinist Russia (Domanico ii).²⁴ Margarita, in becoming a witch owing to Azazello's cream, a demon among Woland's retinue, saves the master from the clutches of Soviet authorities. Her messianic act therefore counters patriarchal humanism on two levels: the supernatural level that transcends the historical patriarchal structures that humanism justifies (being a supernatural figure Margarita

²⁰ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, xi.

²¹ Justin McCabe Weir, *The Author as Hero: Self and Tradition in Mikhail Bulgakov's "The Master and Margarita," Boris Pasternak's "Doctor Zhivago," and Vladimir Nabokov's "The Gift"* (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1997), iii.

²² Jan Vanhellemont and Klein Begijnhof, "Cases of Schizophrenia in *The Master and Margarita* Zina Gimpelevich," *Germano-Slavica* IX, no. 1-2 (1995-1996): 66.

²³ Igor Reif, "The Little Golden Calf, *The Master and Margarita*: A Typology of Mass Thinking in a Totalitarian Society," *Russian Studies in Literature* 51, no. 1 (2014): 59-62.

²⁴ Jana M. Domanico, *Margarita as Supernatural Woman: Bulgakov's Subversion of the Superfluous Man in "The Master and Margarita"* (PhD diss., University of Denver, 2017), ii.

has transcended man-made historical structures), and the gendered level at which a woman as a feminine messiah saves a man (Domanico 61-63).²⁵

As the reader can observe, Bulgakov's text lacks in purely counter-humanist research that is holistic in its approach, and that too from the perspective of Michel Foucault's archaeology. Therefore, sufficient research-gap exists that I will utilize to explore the three texts with a broader and inclusive counter-humanist perspective.

Before moving on, I will reiterate as a concluding remark that counter-humanism is an alternative discourse or a group of discourses that counters the dehumanizing essentialism of humanism. Three of the authors I have reviewed treat humanism as a dehumanizing discourse that originated and legitimized exploitative colonial relationships between the European colonizer and the native colonized. Although counter humanism counters western humanism's dehumanizing historical essentialism, counter humanism in a way is also an essentialist discourses or group of discourses. However, the essentialism counter-humanism arrives at is not a set of exclusionary (gendered or racist) values posited as universal rather a set of elementary values – freedom, honor, dignity – that are necessary for creating historical spaces for alternative or rehumanizing discourses to emerge.

2. Results and Discussion

In the following header, I will explore what version of being human was standardized by humanism in the modern episteme via its nature of discourse. Next, I will evaluate how this modern version of human – how to be a modern man or woman – alienated and dehumanized various characters in the novel. Finally, I will analyze how the supernatural figures of Satan and his gang countered modern humanism's dehumanization by attempting to rehumanize the inhabitants of Moscow, especially the protagonists – the unnamed master, his lover Margarita, and a major character Ivan Nikolaevich.

²⁵ Domanico, *Margarita as Supernatural Woman*, 61-63.

2.1. Countering Empirical Humanism Through Empirical Supernaturalism

Before moving on with the analysis, I will briefly explain the nature of knowledge in the modern episteme around which humanism weaved its narrative of human progress and happiness. The nature of knowledge in the modern episteme is scientific as well as rationalist. We see in the modern era an amalgamation of science as well as reason. This combination of the two human faculties for perceiving and acquiring knowledge about the world around us is what Lane and Hung call “scientific rationality” (15).²⁶ Scientific rationality means logical reasoning based on the evidence of one’s five senses. For the sake of concision, I have renamed scientific rationality, empiricism, in the header as empiricism combines both science and rationality, and means reasoning based on the evidence of our five senses.

Moving on, in light of Foucault’s historical approach to studying ideas and concepts, it is important to contextualize scientific rationality (or empiricism) as the standard of knowledge within the historical time period of Western modernity (late 1800s to late 1900s) rather than viewing it as a seemingly neutral (free from the culturally normative values of the researcher) standard of objective knowledge. Science does appear to us as the harbinger of a value free or objective knowledge, but we must remember Foucault’s words that every historical time period “constrains” thought, speech, and action via the epistemic standards of knowledge and the modern episteme is no exception (Gutting 16).²⁷

Furthermore, although Michel Foucault talks about the power of dominant discourses, he doesn’t claim that dominant discourses are possessed by an individual, a ruling class, the government, or any other agent. Power for Foucault is dispersed, not as a noun (possessable object) but as a verb (action) and every one of us (knowingly or unknowingly) exercises it (as a transitive verb – meaning, the action passes over from a subject to an object) and is power’s

²⁶ Tzu-Wei Hung and Timothy Joseph Lane, eds., *Rationality: Constraints and Contexts* (Academic Press, 2016), 15.

²⁷ Gary Gutting, *Foucault: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 16.

victim. Subjects and objects are not people but social positions, and anyone can occupy them, even the former subject or authority-position can become the object with the change in circumstances. In the analysis part, the reader will observe how Ivan Nikolaevich was displaced from being a subject to the object of modern humanism's empirical standard of discourse in the novel.

Also, although the subjects and objects are obvious at any point in time and space (also called history), the source of power is not somewhere out there in society for us to experience through our five senses. Power is centerless, not "unitary", not objectifiable, and that's why it is dispersed like fog (Revel 377).²⁸ Like the 19th century German philosopher Karl Marx who claims that power is a thing called private property and is possessed by a specific class – the ruling capitalist or bourgeoisie class – to economically exploit the labor power of the worker class or the proletariat, Foucault doesn't locate power in any specific agent. We as historical beings are simultaneously its subjects and objects.

Additionally, Foucault also refrains "from questioning the objectives and intentions of those exercising power" (Dhal 16).²⁹ Nevertheless, since the setting of Bulgakov's novel is communist USSR, I will substantiate Foucault's concept of discourse as power with Karl Marx's concept of class interests to critique Joseph Stalin's communist regime and the resultant alienation and dehumanization of individuals via the (communist) humanist standard of how a modern human being – a man and a woman – should be. This critique will be minimal as political criticism is not the purpose of my thesis. However, since the novel is historically set in Stalinist USSR, it is pertinent to analyze Stalin era's communist brand of modern humanism that as a time period (1929 - 1953) within the modern episteme advocated the same empirical standard/nature of discourse.

²⁸ Judith Revel, "Power," in *The Cambridge Foucault Lexicon*, ed. Leonard Lawlor and John Nale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 377.

²⁹ Saroj Kumar Dhal, "The Foucauldian Concept of Power," Lucknow University, siteContent, 16.

Moving forward, communism is Karl Marx's vision of a humanism that opposes capitalism, or what Marx calls "bourgeoisie" humanism (Davies 13).³⁰ In a capitalist economic system, the ruling bourgeoisie (or owner) class utilizes the non-material superstructure (ideological base including political system, law, religion, discourse, literature, arts, philosophy, etc.) to legitimize the material substructure (material mechanisms of production and distribution involving private property, raw material, labor power, plus the relations of factory worker, and factory owner) in order to subjugate and exploit the proletariat (worker) class.

To make material exploitation justifiable and palatable for the proletarian masses, political ideas of individual uniqueness, and "natural rights" (life, liberty, property) are propagated so the bourgeoisie's private property (land, factories and machines), freedom (to exploit) and life (to enjoy the material gains) are safeguarded against any potential collective movement or revolution by the workers (Landau et. al 133).³¹ This ideology Marx calls "bourgeoisie humanism" (Foster 1).³² In bourgeoisie humanism, power is locatable in the ruling bourgeoisie class whose exploitative hierarchical position (vis a vis the worker class) must be deconstructed via a workers' revolution to create a communist state for equal human progress and happiness (rather than only of the ruling class).

Consequently, communist humanism for Marx, is the deconstruction of exploitative class hierarchies (master owner and slave worker), the equality of all human beings regardless of race, ethnicity, gender and sex, and freedom from all bourgeoisie material and ideological structures. These ideological structures are politics (controlled democracy), religion (that induces pacifism in the workers through a vision of belated justice and

³⁰ Tony Davies, *Humanism* (Routledge, 2008), 13.

³¹ Cecile Landau and Scarlett O'Harra, eds., *The Psychology Book: Big Ideas Explained Simply* (Doring Kindersley, 2012), 133.

³² John Bellamy Foster, "Marx's Critique of Enlightenment Humanism: A Revolutionary Ecological Perspective," *Monthly Review* 74, no. 8 (2023): 1.

redemption in the afterlife), arts and literature (uphold bourgeoisie values such as the normalcy of exploitative class hierarchies, sanctity of private property, rich people as self-made men and women, etc.), knowledge (empiricism as the standard/nature of truth), philosophy (humanism), etc., that are to be done away with after a communist revolution. The concept of private property is to be abolished in a communist state, everything is to be collectively owned by all the people of a state, and this way everyone will equally progress and be happy. This is Marx's version of communist humanism.

Notwithstanding knowledge's subservience to ruling class interests, it is also the domain of resistance as Foucault claims that all discourses contain sub-discourses that counter dominant discourses. Sociologists too agree that knowledge (e.g. the knowledge that race and gender are social constructs led to organized civil rights & feminist movements) focuses on "intentional" social and cultural change whereas technology and environmental catastrophes foster unintentional or random social and cultural change (Wilterdink & Form 1).³³ Therefore, as my thesis suggests based on Foucault's archaeological theory, sub-discourses as knowledges, have the capacity to resist and counter the social and psychological effects of dominant discourses on people.

In the current chapter's case, empirical supernaturalism counters modern (communist) humanism and its dehumanization of human beings that makes the characters in the novel *The Master and Margarita* (1967) conform to a scientific and rationalist standard of discourse and therefore as empirical beings who reason through the evidence of their senses. In such a humanist standard, to hold supernatural beliefs is to become a social outcast and question one's own sanity because of social ostracism. That is why supernatural beings, Satan and his gang, utilize the empirical standard of the modern episteme by physically manifesting in front of the Muscovites and utilize theater as an artistic medium to create the spectacle of a magic

³³Nico Wilterdink and William Form, "Social Change," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, October 28, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-change>, accessed November 18, 2024.

show to reflect the Muscovite's inhumanity and materialism. This way, the supernatural gang rehumanizes the Muscovites by helping them embrace their spiritual side and accept the limitations of empiricism as the standard of assessing knowledge/truth.

Now that sufficient context has been established, I will move on to the analysis of the text. Firstly, I will comment on the historical setting in which the novel is set and then provide a brief summary of the plot. Secondly, I will delineate the alienating and dehumanizing consequences of modern communist humanism that legitimizes an empirical standard of discourse and conditions people to identify themselves as empirical beings who establish truths/facts based on the evidence of their five senses. Lastly, I will explain how Satan and his mischievous entourage rehumanize the inhabitants of Moscow, the protagonist, the unnamed master, and a major character Ivan Nikolaevich.

2.2. The Role of Satan and His Entourage As Supernatural Figures

The novel *The Master and Margarita* (1967) is set in Stalinist USSR and is an autobiographical caricature of Bulgakov's (the master is Bulgakov himself who had to burn the manuscript of the selected novel to escape imprisonment) life in Stalin's dictatorial regime. With the Russian revolution of October 1917, Russia became a communist state – USSR (Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics) – headed by Vladimir Lenin and after his death, his close aid, the ex-military general Joseph Stalin ascended to power. For economic and military progress of his country which he saw as the only counterweight to Western capitalist democracies, Stalin maintained his strength at home by extending state control over every sphere of life.

No one was to oppose Stalin's version of communism (also called Stalinism), and his "secret police" ensured that those suspected of it were either "summarily killed" or "sent to the gulag, a system of labor camps in Siberia" (BBC Teach 1). Human relations were

generally cynical as people were encouraged to inform on one another as potential spies so as to save their skin.³⁴

The workings of Stalin's secret police and its widespread informal spy networks that permeated friend and family relationships are a significant highlight of George Orwell's *1984* (1949). Although soviet communism was a perverted form of what Karl Marx called communism, it was nevertheless a counterweight to Western bourgeoisie humanism in the 20th century as the only "real humanism" for equal progress and happiness of humankind (Foster 2).³⁵

Moving on to the plot of the novel. Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1967) is a philosophical and satirical text that was published twenty-six years after Bulgakov's death by his third wife Elena Bulgakova (whose autobiographical caricature is Margarita) as Stalin had banned any criticism of his dictatorial communist regime. Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* (1967) revolves around two interwoven plots, some major characters and several minor characters. One story takes place in Stalinist Moscow, the other in "ancient Jerusalem" (Bulgakov xiv).³⁶

The central characters in the Moscow story are an unnamed writer, "the master" who is incarcerated in a mental asylum for writing a novel on a banned subject, i.e., theology in atheistic USSR, "Margarita", the writer's lover, Ivan Nikolaevich, the master's friend, and Satan (Bulgakov xi).³⁷ Under the guise of a German Professor Woland, Satan comes to Moscow to expose the limitations of the epistemic standard (scientific rationality) of the modern episteme in assessing truth and the various discourses (what Marx calls the

³⁴ BBC Teach, "Joseph Stalin: National hero or cold-blooded murderer?," *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/articles/zhv747h>, accessed November 18, 2024.

³⁵ Foster, "Marx's Critique of Enlightenment Humanism," 2.

³⁶ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, xiv.

³⁷ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, xi.

ideological superstructure such as politics, law, religion, arts and literature, media, etc.) that legitimize it.

Other than their counter-humanist aims, Satan and his gang also create mischief and pull pranks which ridicule the grave and somber man-made political realities of Stalin's dictatorship. From the timeless standpoint of a supernatural being, man-made historical political systems, objects, ideas and the reverence, and gravity humans ascribe to such ephemeral things would indeed appear ludicrous keeping in mind Woland's response to Beriloz that humans are not just mortal but pitifully and "unexpectedly mortal" (Bulgakov 42).³⁸

The Jerusalem story revolves around two major characters: Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the province of Judea who presided over the trial of Christ and under pressure from Jewish authorities, ordered his crucifixion. At the end of the novel, the two stories intertwine and the "fates of Pilate and the master are simultaneously decided", both finding peace in an eternal afterlife (Bulgakov xiv). Pilate goes on the path toward Christ, while the master and Margarita live on peacefully in a separate place in eternity. Thus, all three characters who believed in the existence of a supernatural realm (symbolized by Christ) find salvation and happiness in an eternal afterlife as a reversal of humanism's narrative of happiness and salvation through material progress (Bulgakov xiv).³⁹

To begin, empiricism was the standard of knowledge in the modern episteme that pervaded all discourses (political, social, economic) and knowledge fields. Keeping in mind that the master was a novelist, he was also expected to follow an empirical standard in writing. Empiricism in art and literature demands (historically) realistic political and economic settings that people can verify as strikingly similar to what they observe around them. To literature scholars and students, empiricism is known by the terms realism and

³⁸ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, xiv.

³⁹ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, xiv.

naturalism, both of which emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century. Therefore, based on Bulgakov's novel, art and literature too had to deal with realistic subject-matter for acceptance as an empirical study of human society in the modern episteme.

In the novel, the discourse of empirical humanism is articulated by the authority figures of literary critics and psychiatrists. Firstly, the consequence of empirical (communist) humanism for the master is his self-incarceration in a mental asylum when he begins to fear incarceration or murder by Stalin's secret-police, and also begins to doubt his own sanity because of the ostracism he faces from the literary critics' defamatory articles.

Secondly, for Margarita who helped the master write the novel, proof-read the manuscript, and was planning on marrying him after the novel's completion, the sudden disappearance of the master leads to self-accusation as she was the one who motivated the master to write on a supernatural subject. The master's disappearance also causes traumatic heartbreak as she can neither confirm the master's death, nor his whereabouts if alive. She also feels alienated from (modern humanism's) material standard of happiness as her happiness comes from the master's love for her, not the material goods in her life (Margarita is already married to a rich and influential bureaucrat but loves the poor master).

Thirdly, for the atheistic Ivan Nikolaevich who meets and converses with Woland, the consequence is his forced incarceration in a mental asylum on charges of being a Schizophrenic when he claims that supernatural beings exist. Lastly, for the inhabitants of Moscow, the consequence of modern humanist empiricism is normalized materialism (as the supernatural or the spiritual is non-existent in an empirical realm) and inhumane greed and cynicism.

Starting with the first instance of empirical humanism's dehumanization regarding Ivan Nikolaevich, he is the latest patient in Dr. Stravinsky's psychiatric hospital admitted on charges of being a Schizophrenic. The incarceration of Ivan is both humorous and ironic. The

very epistemic standard – empiricism – he defends as infallible and based on which he proudly admits that there is no empirical evidence for God, gets him locked up in a mental asylum as soon as he begins to harangue everyone that he has met and talked with Satan, and that Satan has murdered his friend, the editor Mikhail Beriloz.

Ivan is a budding poet whom the editor of a “fat literary journal” Mikhail Beriloz commissions to write a defamatory poem on Christ (Bulgakov 7).⁴⁰ The work is done but Beriloz is unsatisfied as the poem, although portrays Jesus negatively, makes the character of Jesus appear “completely alive” (Bulgakov 9).⁴¹ Beriloz tells Ivan that the mistake should be corrected before the poem is published as no such person existed and gives various historical references which indicate that he is a fairly learned man. At that moment, a gentleman who introduces himself as a German professor of black magic, Woland, joins them and tells them that Jesus indeed existed and that he witnessed Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of the province of Judea ordering his crucifixion on pressure from the Jewish high priest Joseph Kaifa.

Hearing this, Beriloz thinks the professor mad, and then makes light of his comment by admitting that in “our country” which is a modern country, “atheism does not surprise anyone” as the “majority of our population ... long ago ceased believing in the fairy tales about god” (Bulgakov 12).⁴² To explain the reason behind such widespread atheistic beliefs, Beriloz tells Woland that “in the realm of reason there can be no proof of God’s existence” (Bulgakov 12).⁴³ Their conversation goes on and Beriloz’s tone and tenor become condescending. The editor tells Woland that there is no God, that natural laws govern the

⁴⁰ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 7.

⁴¹ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 9.

⁴² Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 12.

⁴³ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 12.

world, and as for human life, “man governs it himself” with the help of man-made social and political institutions (Bulgakov 13).⁴⁴

In a way, Beriloz offends Woland by his arrogance when he claims that humans govern their own lives. Woland also gets offended by Beriloz’s denial because in denying God, Satan automatically becomes non-existent. Therefore, after retorting to Beriloz that “how can man govern [his life], if he ... cannot even vouch for his own tomorrow?” Woland foretells that Beriloz will die that day (Bulgakov 13).⁴⁵ To Ivan who shouts that he agrees “a hundred percent!” with Beriloz’s every word, Woland smilingly says the word “schizophrenia” and goes away (Bulgakov 11 & 16).⁴⁶ And so it happens that Beriloz dies in front of Ivan by falling under a tram car.

As for Ivan, when he sees Beriloz die, he thinks the German Professor has performed a black magic trick and chases him all around the city. At last, when he returns to the editor’s office to inform everyone of Beriloz’s death, he is barefoot, wearing nothing but his “underwear” and screams that police should be called with “five motor cycles and machine-guns to catch the professor” (Bulgakov 60).⁴⁷ When no one complies, he hits an office worker out of rage. The police are then called, and Ivan is taken to Dr. Stravinsky’s psychiatric hospital where the doctor, after listening to Ivan’s story, indeed declares him schizophrenic as Woland foretold.

Gradually the truth dawns upon Ivan as he empirically verifies everything that Woland said. He sees Beriloz die, hears the doctor pronounce him Schizophrenic, and sees himself locked up in the asylum. Ivan then reasons that Woland was indeed a supernatural being. Ivan Nikolaevich therefore becomes, ironically and humorously so, the first victim of the very epistemic standard he championed along with Beriloz as unquestionably absolute

⁴⁴ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 13.

⁴⁵ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 13.

⁴⁶ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 11,6.

⁴⁷ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 60.

and infallible. The very empirical standard that conditioned him to be a modern human being, dehumanizes him as a “madman” when he admits that he has seen “unclean powers” with his very own eyes (Bulgakov 70 & 88).⁴⁸

The next instance of alienation and dehumanization brought about by modern (communist) humanism’s empirical standard of knowledge involves the unnamed master. The master is already a patient in the asylum when Ivan is incarcerated. With the help of keys that he steals from the hospital nurse, the master climbs the balcony and checks in to meet the new patient, Ivan. The two strike a conversation and reveal the reasons why both were incarcerated in the asylum.

The master reveals that unlike Ivan, he willingly came to the asylum out of constant fear from Stalin’s secret police, self-doubt as to his own sanity, and self-alienation from his identity as a writer. The constant fear of being captured or killed, says the master felt like a tangible “octopus” asphyxiating him (Bulgakov 146).⁴⁹ Coupled with the rejection of his novel, and constant denunciation from literary critics, his fearful state made him question his own sanity and alienated him from his own identity as a writer (Bulgakov 146).⁵⁰ The reason for such traumatic experiences, tells the master to Ivan, was his writing of a novel on Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilate which did not conform to the empirical standard of modern literary writing.

The master further tells that as he sought to publish his novel, he was criticized for writing an imaginary tale rather than a realist or empirical work that deals with “real” things rather than fiction (Bulgakov 274).⁵¹ The master tells Ivan that the publishing house hesitatingly took the manuscript for decision-making on its publishing by the editorial board while the in-office editor suspiciously questioned his whereabouts and motives for writing on

⁴⁸ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 70,88.

⁴⁹ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 146.

⁵⁰ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 146.

⁵¹ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 274.

“such a strange theme” (Bulgakov 175).⁵² After two weeks, the manuscript was returned to the master. With an overwhelming sense of failure, he returned home.

The very next day, the master was shocked to see his name in daily newspapers. He was denounced and defamed for three continuous days in daily newspapers by the editorial-board members of the publishing house. The board members accused him of being an unpatriotic person and an “enemy” of the truth as well as the people (Bulgakov 175).⁵³ The editors also mocked the master as being a “militant old believer” trying to romanticize a superstitious old time rather than a modern empiricist who talks from facts, and an apologist for “Jesus Christ” if he even existed (Bulgakov 176).⁵⁴ The critics altogether denounced the novel as pure fantasy.

The master in despair burns the manuscript which indicates that his own creative activity becomes hateful to him. This alienation from one’s own creative activity is what Marx calls the “dehumanization” and “alienation” of factory workers in assembly lines when workers are made to repress their creativity by repetitively making the same uncreative/mundane object day in and day out (Horowitz 1).⁵⁵ No sense of satisfaction comes from such an alienating and “dehumanizing” robotic activity says Marx (Horowitz 1).⁵⁶ Ironically, communism was to remedy workers’ alienation but Stalin’s perverted communist regime and the modern humanist paradigm of empiricism it propagated, dehumanized and alienated the master from his freely created work of art.

The master further says that the critics’ censure and the feeling that the entirety of Moscow derided him took a heavy toll on him, making him feel like an alien among

⁵² Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 175.

⁵³ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 175.

⁵⁴ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 176.

⁵⁵ Asher Horowitz, "Marx's Theory of Alienation," *Perspectives on Politics*, York University, March 1, 2011, https://www.yorku.ca/horowitz/courses/lectures/35_marx_alienation.html, accessed November 23, 2024.

⁵⁶ Horowitz, "Marx's Theory of Alienation."

Muscovites, and abhor his own name which he “renounced ... as [he] generally did everything in life” (Bulgakov 138).⁵⁷ His feelings of self-alienation, self-doubt as to his own sanity in a world where normal humans are supposed to be empirical beings who reason from the facts of their senses, and the constant fear of being incarcerated or killed by Stalin’s secret police, led the nameless master to seek refuge and acceptability among the various anonymous inmates of Dr. Stravinsky’s mental hospital who had mere numbers such as “room no. 117” (Ivan’s identity) and “118” (the master’s identity) to identify them (Bulgakov 101 & 419).⁵⁸

Lastly, I will talk about the alienating effect of modern humanism’s empirical nature/standard of knowledge on the master’s lover Margarita. Margarita plays a considerable role in helping the master write his novel. She advises him, proof-reads his manuscripts, and motivates him by calling him a “master” writer whom good fortune and fame await (Bulgakov 174).⁵⁹ However, when the master is denounced by the critics and becomes alienated not only from the rest of Moscow society but also from his own self, he leaves her suddenly, the day they were supposed to marry.

The master’s despair, and his sudden disappearance break Margarita’s heart and though she is enraged and wishes to “poison Latunsky” one of the literary critics, she knows she cannot do anything (Bulgakov 176).⁶⁰ She is like the master, a powerless human being and on top of that, unlike the master, a woman in a patriarchal world for whom it is almost “impossible” to take on patriarchal modern structures of power on her own (Bulgakov 176).⁶¹

Like the master, she too believes in the truth of what the master was writing about. She too believes that Jesus and Pilate existed, that the crucifixion was a fact, and that religion

⁵⁷ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 138.

⁵⁸ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 101,419.

⁵⁹ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 174.

⁶⁰ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 176.

⁶¹ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 176.

as representative of humankind's spiritual side is necessary for a wholesome life. Therefore, when the master suddenly leaves her out of self-alienating despair, she too feels alienated from the society around her that ridicules and silences historically "superstitious" voices (Bulgakov 106).⁶² The master's disappearance aggravates her alienation and she becomes traumatized, thinking herself "bound to a dead man" whose life or death she cannot verify (Bulgakov 218).⁶³

Concludingly, Margarita also suffers from modern empirical humanism's narrative of happiness through material progress. She is married to a rich and influential bureaucrat, a position she knows is envious for many women in Soviet society. Nevertheless, Margarita feels alienated as her happiness is spiritual and psychological in nature. Her happiness is not tied to material goods therefore she feels an "extraordinary loneliness" in her opulent and socially coveted life without the master (Bulgakov 139).⁶⁴

Like the master, she becomes alienated from the rest of Soviet society as well. Nonetheless, she chooses to endure her "pain" in silence because she knows if ever, she complains about her unhappy state to anyone, a barrage of criticism would befall and ostracize her as an ungrateful "witch" (Bulgakov 266).⁶⁵ And because she deeply desires to find the truth about the master, she does not take any chances to further complicate matters.

Now that sufficient evidence has been established as to the alienating and dehumanizing impact of the modern (communist) humanism's empirical standard of knowledge, I will go on to explore how the supernatural figures of Satan and his gang attempt to rehumanize the master, Margarita, Ivan, and the inhabitants of Moscow. In rehumanizing the Muscovites, Satan and his supernatural gang utilize artistic discourse (theatre) as a subversion (if humans are powerless to utilize art, Satan as a transcendental figure isn't) of

⁶² Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 106.

⁶³ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 218.

⁶⁴ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 139.

⁶⁵ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 266.

Stalin's crackdown on artistic freedoms to create the spectacle of a magic show. Therein the gang reflects the Muscovites' inhumanity and materialism to them so the Muscovites can reflect on the incomplete and one-sided materialist progress of modernity legitimized by empirical (communist) humanism.

Starting with the spectacle of the magic show, Woland and his gang rent the "Variety" theater in Moscow where the Muscovites are invited to enjoy a spectacular magic show by the "esteemed" Professor of black magic, Woland (Bulgakov 155).⁶⁶ During this spectacle, two magical events, one involving money bills falling from the ceiling and the other involving a fashion show for the women, reveal to the Muscovites' their inhumane greed, cynicism, and materialism. The spectacle's purpose is to rehumanize the Muscovites, firstly via self-reflection on modernity's one-sided materialist progress legitimized by humanism's empirical nature of knowledge, and secondly via catharsis.

Continuing with the cathartic significance of the theatrical spectacle of Woland, Aristotle mentions in his *Poetics* six major components, including spectacle (the visual performance of the entire tragedy, and especially the emotionally overwhelming impact of some scenes) which are important for a tragedy to have a cathartic effect on the audience. Spectacle is important for inducing catharsis which is a rehumanizing experience. Catharsis cleanses strong emotions such as pity and fear (by evoking these emotions in the audience) that if repressed, build up to the extent that their violent release might lead to social conflicts. Therefore, Woland and his gang utilize the spectacle of a supernatural magic show to rehumanize the Muscovites at the theater.

Starting with the first event of the supernatural magic show, one of Woland's gang member Koroviev lets money bills fall from the ceiling and tells everyone that the bills are real. On hearing this, men and women in the theater jump at the bills, hit each other, let lose

⁶⁶ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 155.

their greed, and the whole situation becomes an ugly scene of “general agitation” which Woland amusingly watches (Bulgakov 125).⁶⁷ He then posits a question to the Muscovites at the theater for self-reflection. Woland asks whether with all the material changes of modernity which humanism’s empirical standard of knowledge and its narrative of progress promised, “with trams, telephones, ... [and] automobiles”, have “the city folk changed inwardly?” (Bulgakov 122).⁶⁸ At this, a brief moment of silence takes over the theater audience which was all Woland wanted as an agent of “good” in the real sense (Bulgakov 125).⁶⁹

To explain the importance of this brief moment of self-reflection, it was fully planned by Woland because as the elder Zosima says in *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), in order “to change the world, man’s way of thinking must be changed” (Dostoevsky 405).⁷⁰ Therefore, in order to inspire discursive changes in the modern episteme, Woland utilizes his supernatural discourse to affect the subjectivity of the Muscovites, so they would reimagine themselves as created beings with a spiritual side as well rather than as evolved beings with a material side for whom simply material progress denotes happiness.

I also term Woland good because he is exactly like Ivan’s devil who tells Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) that he was and remains God’s agent committed to fulfilling God’s orders. If God orders that the devil take the blame for man’s fall and become the scapegoat just to ensure “happenings” in the world, the devil accepts without hesitation because he understands that happenings or sufferings are necessary for humanizing life (Dostoevsky 861).⁷¹ Woland too, therefore, turns out to be a force for good whose goal vis-à-vis the people of Moscow is to rehumanize them. His supernatural

⁶⁷ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 125.

⁶⁸ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 122.

⁶⁹ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 125.

⁷⁰ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Bantam Classic ed. (Bantam Books, 1981), 405.

⁷¹ Dostoyevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, 861.

role is to counter the dehumanizing and alienating effects of the modern humanist episteme that weaves the narrative of one-sided material progress as the epitome of human happiness. And no one better than Satan can undertake this task as being a supernatural being, he exists not only outside the modern empirical episteme and its humanist structures but also the despotic political structures of Stalin's regime.

Moving on, the second event involves a fashion show for the women. This event pulled by Woland's entourage makes news throughout Moscow as it publicly affects a great many women. On the stage, Koroviev conjures up a "ladies' shop" with clothing and accessories from famous French brands (Bulgakov 127).⁷² The ladies are invited to wear and keep anything from the ladies' shop in exchange for their current attire. Though reluctant at first, the women "from all sides" come up on the stage, grabbing whatever they can, changing into them, and "coming out in new ones" (Bulgakov 129).⁷³ To speed up things, Koroviev encourages them to do so quickly, within a one-minute timer, and the same scene of snatching and agitation plays out as did before with the falling money bills. The entire theater descends into chaos which the police try to control and the two gang members, Koroviev and Behemoth, simply melt into thin air. After a few hours, the trick comes full circle as the clothes vanish and the women are seen rushing naked to their homes.

The entire spectacle of the magic show is a controlled experiment utilizing theater as an artistic medium to reflect the historical inhumanity, materialism, and alienation of people from their own selves and one another brought about by an empirical standard of discourse that makes people suppress their spiritual side and overemphasize their material side (& therefore material needs). Through the medium of theater, Woland and his gang create a miniaturized version of the modern empirical humanist episteme, reveal its dehumanizing impacts (inhumanity, cynicism, and materialism) and then counter these effects through their

⁷² Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 127.

⁷³ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 129.

empirical supernatural discourse which involves magical acts (articulated through the theatrical medium) and their cathartic or rehumanizing effect on the theater audience.

Moving on to the rehumanizing and cathartic role of the spectacle as a whole, when Woland arrives on stage, he conjures a chair out of thin air and sits on it in front of everyone. The audience is awestruck and claps overwhelmingly. Then a card trick is performed by Koroviev in which cards in Koroviev's hands are found from the pockets of the audience. As the audience members become overwhelmed with feelings of awe, the conductor of the magic show, "the master of ceremonies ... Georges Bengalsky" calms the audience by claiming that everything was "simply a perfect ... technique of conjuring ... [with a] purely scientific" explanation behind it (Bulgakov 121 & 125).⁷⁴ As the audience begins to relax, Behemoth, a member of Woland's gang beheads Bengalsky, blood spurts "in fountains ... from the torn neck arteries" but surprisingly Bengalsky remains alive, and his severed head keeps on crying to be placed back on the body (Bulgakov 126).⁷⁵

At this spectacle, both fear and pity overtake the audience. "Hysterical women's cries" fill the theater and on the request of an overwhelming majority of people who shout "for God's sake, don't torture him!", the severed head is reattached to the body (Bulgakov 126).⁷⁶ Bengalsky lives, however, the experience is traumatizing for him, and the master of ceremonies is instantly rushed to a psychiatric clinic. When the head is re-attached, the audience calms down again and claps, indicating that their catharsis has been successful.

This spectacle that Woland and his gang perform was rehumanizing for the audience in the sense that the same people who moments ago were fighting to death with one another over a couple of money bills and symbolizing a general air of cynical individualism,

⁷⁴ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 121,125.

⁷⁵ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 126.

⁷⁶ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 126.

collectively felt pity for Bengalsky. Some cried for him while all demanded that his head be reattached.

As Foucault stresses the importance of historical epistemes and their conditioning impacts on people, we clearly see that the same people behave in two different (inhumane animalistic competition for money and empathy/pity for Bengalsky) ways in two different environmental/epistemic (dehumanizing and rehumanizing) conditions. Therefore, historically dehumanizing versions of being human, in the current chapter's case propagated by modern humanist empiricism, condition people to focus overwhelmingly on the material side (material needs of hunger, shelter, procreation, luxury, etc.) of their life and material progress (more material goods) for happiness while disregarding their spiritual side and resultant ethical progress.

Moving on to the next instance of re-humanization involving the master, interestingly, we see a subversion of modern patriarchy when Margarita makes a deal with the devil – Woland – in order to save her beloved, the master. Conventionally, it has always been men who make deals with the devil as in Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *Faust* (1808) and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* (1592) where the infamous Dr. Faustus makes a bargain with Mephistopheles.

However, as Domanico writes in her paper on supernatural feminism, as “someone restricted by society”, the modern empiricist episteme and its humanist narrative of material progress for happiness, Margarita's happiness is not tied to material goods but in her love for the master whom she saves by becoming a “supernatural woman” (2).⁷⁷ By making a Faustian bargain with Satan, she becomes a “female representation of” Dr. Faustus, acquires supernatural powers (becomes a witch by growing wings), “transcends” both “Soviet societal” as well as humanist empiricist restrictions and then goes on a rampage, destroying

⁷⁷ Domanico, *Margarita as Supernatural Woman*, 2.

the apartments of the literary critics who defamed and denounced her beloved master in daily newspapers (Domanico 3).⁷⁸

After she has had her fill of revenge and the deconstruction of patriarchal structures of power in Stalin's modern USSR, Margarita requests Woland to bring the master back to her. From here onwards, I will deal with the instance of re-humanization of the master. As both instances, that of Margarita's and the master's re-humanization are interrelated, I am dealing with them together.

To continue, on Margarita's request, Woland conjures the master in his apartment where the master meets Margarita and is amazed to see Satan in person. As a surprise to the master and as an attempt by Bulgakov to show the transcendental power of art in inspiring epistemic changes, Woland also brings back the master's manuscript, telling the master that "manuscripts do not burn" (Bulgakov 287).⁷⁹ The point that Woland (and through him Bulgakov) tries to make is that art and especially artistic discourse transcends historical time periods (such as the modern episteme and its empirical standard of truth that represses the supernatural) and their relative truths by aspiring toward universal truths.

To prove this point that artistic discourse transcends both time and space (a historical time period and the normative values it propagates), Woland asks the master to complete his novel in order to redeem Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor who ordered Christ's crucifixion. Woland takes the master and Margarita to a timeless zone where he shows Pontius Pilate sleeping with his faithful dog for "about two thousand years" (Bulgakov 381).⁸⁰ Woland tells the master that his state of limbo has to do with the master's unfinished novel. As soon as he completes it, Pontius will find his resolution. The master therefore

⁷⁸ Domanico, *Margarita as Supernatural Woman*, 3.

⁷⁹ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 287.

⁸⁰ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 381.

shouts to Pontius, “You’re free!” and redeems him by letting him meet Jesus Christ whose death he wanted to prevent (Bulgakov 382).⁸¹

In this part we see both the master and Pontius Pilate getting rehumanized via Woland’s supernatural discourse that utilizes art to transcend both time and space. The master gets rehumanized by accepting his identity as an honorable writer (and not a socially disgraced person) and reacquiring his lost belief in the transcendent power of artistic discourse. Pontius Pilate on the other hand gets rehumanized when the master completes his novel (the part involving Pontius Pilate) and frees him to meet Jesus. Woland, therefore, clearly shows the significance of meaning, discourse, knowledge, and language when he lets the master’s work transpire changes beyond time and space in an era that was separated from the master by “about two thousand” years (Bulgakov 382).⁸²

Lastly, the master with Woland’s help rehumanizes Ivan whom he meets in his “room no. 117” (Bulgakov 317).⁸³ The master gives Ivan the renewed manuscript and asks the former poet to write and complete the master and Margarita’s part of the story in the novel as he completed Pilate’s story. This act is also symbolic as it means that the story, especially of resistance against illegitimate hierarchies of power, should go on forever, being taken up by someone new in a new era/episteme. Then the master and Margarita, whose bodies have died and are souls now, vanish.

We do not know whether Ivan completes the novel or not. But Bulgakov does tell us in the epilogue that Ivan is freed and as “Professor Ivan Nikolaevich” a respectable “researcher at the Institute of History and Philosophy” sometimes wanders alone at the Patriarch’s Ponds (the place where Ivan and Beriloz talked to Satan) (Bulgakov 393).⁸⁴ Although Stravinsky does a good job at altering Ivan’s memory by making him believe that

⁸¹ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 382.

⁸² Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 381.

⁸³ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 317.

⁸⁴ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 393.

as a young man “he fell victim to criminal hypnotists and was afterward treated and cured” he feels drawn to the place for some reason (Bulgakov 393).⁸⁵

Bulgakov uses substantial symbolism to explain Ivan’s condition. After Ivan sits at the Patriarch’s Ponds and wonders about why he looks at the sky, he feels strangely ill, gets back to bed and sleeps. While he sleeps, he dreams of two people whom he cannot remember, Pontius Pilate and the master, amicably chatting and walking toward some place. Although consciously Ivan’s memories have been repressed/altered, we must remember what the famed psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud says about repression. Whatever is repressed, inevitably returns (Freud 240).⁸⁶

Also, like the novel that remains incomplete, we do not see any resolution for Ivan. Even so, his dreams that he experiences every year at the “spring full moon” bring back some repressed memories of the supernatural realities that the modern empirical episteme desperately represses as unreal and false (Bulgakov 393).⁸⁷ Ivan’s recurrent dreams, therefore, are Bulgakov’s hope for a potential “return of the repressed” and their subsequent re-humanization of Ivan which like the master’s novel remains incomplete but also in continuity (Bulgakov 393).⁸⁸

Lastly, in keeping the novel incomplete, I will also argue that Bulgakov has made the master and Margarita more than just individuals. The writer has made them subject-positions of his counter-humanist discourse (and in general all counter/alternative discourses). Since they are subject positions, the incomplete novel suggests the continuity of life and conveys the message that these positions of resistance can be taken up by any individual in any future episteme to create a livable and rehumanizing space for themselves.

⁸⁵ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 393.

⁸⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (Penguin Books, 1991), 240.

⁸⁷ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 393.

⁸⁸ Bulgakov, *Master and Margarita*, 393.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, in this research I argued that humanism as an anthropocentric discourse is an exclusionary and one-sided discourse as all historical ideologies/discourses are. The reason for this inherent limitation is that discourses arise to reflect and fulfill the needs of the historical time periods in which they arise. Therefore, I argued that historical discourses such as humanism should not be universalized as having a timeless relevance, especially when such anthropocentric discourses define what in essence a human being is. Popularization of such historical discourses as universal through a historical standard of knowledge/truth always results in dehumanization and alienation of people who do not subscribe to such a humanist definition.

As I explored in this research, modern empirical humanism weaves a narrative of happiness via material progress around the historical construct of humans as empirical beings who make rational decisions through the evidence of their five senses. This criterion legitimizes materialism by highlighting materiality and disregards humankind's spiritual side by alienating and ostracizing all those who raise alternative discourses.

In such a situation where people are dehumanized and alienated from their spiritual side, Satan lands in Stalinist Moscow where the political tyranny of Stalinism and the epistemological tyranny of empirical humanism is at its peak. The Muscovites are alienated and dehumanized, especially the protagonists, the unnamed master, his lover, Margarita, and his friend, Ivan Nikolaevich. Satan, therefore, disguised as a German professor of black magic, takes up on himself to reveal the dehumanizing effects of modern empirical humanism and subsequently rehumanizing the inhabitants of Moscow.

With the help of his gang, Woland counters modern empirical humanism via his supernaturalist discourse by utilizing and exploiting the empirical standard of modern humanism by physically manifesting himself for all to see, and also counters Stalin's

restriction on artistic freedoms by articulating his supernatural discourse through the artistic medium of theater. By utilizing art (theater), Woland and his gang therefore not only reveal the dehumanizing effects of the modern empirical version of being human, but also propagate universal values such as the sanctity of human life, fundamental rights, and wholesome progress involving both material (technology, infrastructure) and spiritual progress for all.

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