**Carnivalesque elements in “Master and Margarita”**

According to Bakhtin, carnival is a time or space in which the normal rules of society don’t apply, when everything is permitted. During carnival ordinary citizens become equal as the boundaries such as the control of the church and social hierarchy vanish for the time of the carnival.[[1]](#footnote-1)

“Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Chapter 12 of the novel written by Mikhail Bulgakov “Master and Margarita” can be described as a carnival for the purpose of the Bakhtinian approach. The chapter describes the magic show presented by Woland and his entourage to the Muscovites. The show includes the scenes of the trick with money and the “Boutique” for the ladies, where they can exchange their old clothes for the new items of the famous brands. Due to the extensive length of the chapter, I will only include two extracts, which can best show the elements of carnival.

The lines which will be used to show the elements of carnival are in bold print.

‘And now, citizens,’ Bengalsky began, smiling his baby smile, ‘there is about to come before you ...’ Here Bengalsky interrupted himself and spoke in a different tone: **‘I see the audience has grown for the third part. We’ve got half the city here! I met a friend the other day and said to him: “Why don’t you come to our show? Yesterday we had half the city.” And he says to me: “I live in the other half!”** ’ Bengalsky paused, waiting for a burst of laughter, but as **no one laughed**, he went on: ‘... And so, now comes the famous foreign artist. Monsieur Woland, with a seance of black ´. **Well, both you and I know,**’ here Bengalsky smiled a wise smile, ‘**that there’s no such thing in the world, and that it’s all just superstition, and Maestro Woland is simply a perfect master of the technique of conjuring, as we shall see from the most interesting part, that is, the exposure of this technique, and since we’re all of us to a man both for technique and for its exposure, let’s bring on Mr Woland! ...’**

After uttering all this claptrap, Bengalsky pressed his palms together and waved them in greeting through the slit of the curtain, which caused it to part with a soft rustic.

The entrance of the magician with his long assistant and the cat, who came on stage on his hind legs, pleased the audience greatly.

‘**An armchair for me,**’ Woland ordered in a low voice, and that same second an armchair appeared on stage, no one knew how or from where, in which the magician sat down. ‘**Tell me, my gentle Fagott,**’ Woland inquired of the checkered clown, who evidently had another appellation than Koroviev, **‘what do you think, the Moscow populace has changed significantly, hasn’t it?’**

The magician looked out at the hushed audience, struck by the appearance of the armchair out of nowhere.

**‘That it has, Messire,’** Fagott-Koroviev replied in a low voice.

**‘You’re right. The city folk have changed greatly ... externally, that is ... as has the city itself, incidentally... Not to mention their clothing, these ... what do you call them ... trams, automobiles ... have appeared ...’**

**‘Buses ...’** - Fagott prompted deferentially.

The audience listened attentively to this conversation, thinking it constituted a prelude to the magic tricks. The wings were packed with performers and stage-hands, and among their faces could be seen the tense, pale face of Rimsky.

The physiognomy of Bengalsky, who had retreated to the side of the stage, began to show some perplexity. He raised one eyebrow slightly and, taking advantage of a pause, spoke:

**‘The foreign artiste is expressing his admiration for Moscow and its technological development, as well as for the Muscovites.’** Here Bengalsky smiled twice, first to the stalls, then to the gallery.

Woland, Fagott and the cat turned their heads in the direction of the master of ceremonies.

**‘Did I express admiration?’** the magician asked the checkered Fagott.

**‘By no means, Messire, you never expressed any admiration,’** came the reply.

**‘Then what is the man saying?’**

**‘He quite simply lied!’** the checkered assistant declared sonorously, for the whole theatre to hear, and turning to Bengalsky, he added:

**‘Congrats, citizen, you done lied!’**

**Tittering spattered from the gallery,** but Bengalsky gave a start and goggled his eyes. [[3]](#footnote-3)

The scene in the second extract takes place just a few paragraphs after the first one, when the group started to show the magic tricks.

The audience stirred. Fagott and the cat walked along the footlights to opposite sides of the stage. Fagott snapped his fingers, and with a rollicking Three, four!’ snatched a deck of cards from the air, shuffled it, and sent it in a long ribbon to the cat. The cat intercepted it and sent it back. The satiny snake whiffled, Fagott opened his mouth like a nestling and swallowed it all card by card. After which the cat bowed, scraping his right hind paw, winning himself unbelievable applause.

**‘Class! Real class!’ rapturous shouts came from the wings.**

And Fagott jabbed his finger at the stalls and announced:

**‘You’ll find that same deck, esteemed citizens, on citizen Parchevsky in the seventh row, just between a three-rouble bill and a summons to court in connection with the payment of alimony to citizen Zeikova.’**

There was a stirring in the stalls, people began to get up, and finally some citizen whose name was indeed Parchevsky, all crimson with amazement, extracted the deck from his wallet and began sticking it up in the air, not knowing what to do with it.

‘You may keep it as a souvenir!’ cried Fagott. ‘Not for nothing did you say at dinner yesterday that if it weren’t for poker your life in Moscow would be utterly unbearable.’

**‘An old trick!’** came from the gallery. **The one in the stalls is from the same company.’**

**‘You think so?’** shouted Fagott, squinting at the gallery. **‘In that case you’re also one of us, because the deck is now in your pocket!’**

There was movement in the balcony, and a joyful voice said: **‘Right! He’s got it! Here, here! ... Wait! It’s ten-rouble bills!’**

Those sitting in the stalls turned their heads. In the gallery a bewildered citizen found in his pocket a bank-wrapped packet with ‘One thousand roubles’ written on it. His neighbours hovered over him, and he, in amazement, picked at the wrapper with his fingernail, trying to find out if the bills were real or some sort of magic ones.

**‘By God, they’re real! Ten-rouble bills!’** joyful cries came from the gallery.

**‘I want to play with the same kind of deck,’** a fat man in the middle of the stalls requested merrily.

**‘Avec playzeer!’** Fagott responded**. ‘But why just you? Everyone will warmly participate!’** And he commanded: ‘Look up, please! ... One!’ There was a pistol in his hand. He shouted: ‘Two!’ The pistol was pointed up. He shouted: ‘Three!’ There was a flash, a bang, and all at once, from under the cupola, bobbing between the trapezes, white strips of paper began falling into the theatre.

They twirled, got blown aside, were drawn towards the gallery, bounced into the orchestra and on to the stage. In a few seconds, the rain of money, ever thickening, reached the seats, and the spectators began snatching at it.

**Hundreds of arms were raised, the spectators held the bills up to the lighted stage and saw the most true and honest-to-God watermarks.** The smell also left no doubts: it was the incomparably delightful smell of freshly printed money. The whole theatre was seized first with merriment and then with amazement. The word ‘money, money!’ hummed everywhere, there were gasps of ‘ah, ah!’ and merry laughter.[[4]](#footnote-4)

The whole magic show can be said to be an example of a carnival. At the beginning of the show people do not react in any way to Bengalsky’s joke, however, they laughed when it was pointed out by Koroviev that he lied, even though it was not actually funny. People enjoyed the abuse of the person in authority (Bengalsky), but they were still bound by the fear of the possible consequence - “Tittering spattered from the gallery” (people did not laugh openly).

The novel “The Master and Margarita” is set in around 1930s, at the times of the Soviet Union. Discipline and unity at the time were among the most important party values. “The party is always right” and “one cannot be right against the party”.[[5]](#footnote-5)The slightest hesitation regarding to leadership of the party or anything which could be regarded as going against the party was enough to put the person in the camp of counterrevolution.[[6]](#footnote-6)Carnivalesque features suspend fear in the audience, revealing personal views of the citizens and, somehow, breaks the Soviet ideology for the time of the “carnival”. People feel free in expressing their own opinions, not facing the fear of possible consequences – they laugh at the Koroviev’s remark, showing the attitude towards the authoritative discourse, which prescribes what is allowed to laugh at and what is not, notwithstanding the fear of looking a non-Soviet in the eyes of the other people at the start.

Carnival features reflected in the speech patterns. For example: abusive language. "But we are especially interested in the language which mocks and insults the deity and which was part of the ancient comic cults"[[7]](#footnote-7)

One of the element of the carnivalesque is the swapping of places of those who are in power and the ordinary people – “it is the king’s uncrowning”. [[8]](#footnote-8)Laughing at the person in authority shows the change in the hierarchy between the people in that scene. Bengalsky does not seem to be in authority anymore, as he gets the less respectful attitude towards him. “Laughter works philosophical changes upon life and society. Laughter erupts from the collective body, but its most important function is internal; it defends freedom of thought.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

The differences of the two characters Bengalsky and Koroviev can be seen in the way they speak. Bengalsky is very formal and rhetorical in his speech, the jokes seem more like a performance from the script. On the other hand, Koroviev’s language is engaging with the audience, his speech is informal and more natural. This can show another feature of the Bakhtin theory – polyphony. This is where there are two or more voices within the text and they are distinct of each other as the characters have different perspectives. In this case, Bengalsky is an employee of the “authority”, and the way he speaks is an example of the views of the authority (e.g. when he points out as if to ensure that magic do not exist and this is all superstition). Koroviev looks more like an ordinary citizen.

Carnival reunites the audience breaking the borders of fear and limitations – as the scene progresses people engage more with the magicians by talking to them and taking part in the tricks. Starting from a few random people taking part in the show (e.g. the man who wants to “play with the same kind of deck “) the carnival progresses and by the end of the second extract “Hundreds of arms were raised”. The show is not a “spectacle seen by the people” anymore – it became a joyful chaos. Carnival in Bakhtin’s view creates:

“This sense of the world, liberating one from fear, bringing the world maximally close to a person and bringing one person maximally close to another (everything is drawn into the zone of free familiar contact), with its joy at change and its joyful relativity, is opposed to that one-sided and gloomy official seriousness which is dogmatic and hostile to evolution and change, which seeks to absolutize a given condition of existence or a given social order.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

To conclude, Woland and his entourage carry with them the emancipation, which helps to break the strict hierarchy of the official discipline. This is the main function of carnival. The scene with its satirical and humour attitudes towards the social norms of the time carries out the same function as the carnival – changes the “seriousness” of the culture, stereotypical way of thinking of the Muscovites.

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1. Bakhtin, “Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics”, (Ed. and Trans. by Caryl Emerson, Theory and History of Literature, Volume 8, University of Minnesota Press, 1999), ch 5 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Bakhtin, “Rabelais and His World” (Trans. by Helene Iswolsky, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984) at pg 7 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Bulgakov, “Master and Margarita”, (Trans by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Penguin Books, 1997) at Pg 132 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Bulgakov (n3), at pg 135 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Sheila Fitzpatrick “Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary life in Extraordinary Times. Soviet Russia in the 1930s”, (Oxford university press, 2000), ch 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Bakhtin, “Rabelais and His World” (n2) at pg 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bakhtin, “Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics” (n1) at сh 5, pg 124 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Shanti Elliot “Carnival and Dialogue in Bakhtin's Poetics of Folklore” (1999), Folklore Forum 30(1/2):129-139, at pg 131 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Blooms modern critical interpretations “Fyodor Dostoevsky’s Crime and Punishment”, (Edited by Harold Bloom, Chelsea house publishers, 2004) at pg 72 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)