Three Stories and Polyphonic Structure ——The Master and Margarita in a Polyphonic Perspective

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Abstract. Adopting the characteristics of polyphonic novels proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin in his Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics, this paper analyzes the polyphonic structure in the three stories and the interweaving of multiple characters' perspectives to discuss the author's critique of human cowardice. Mikhail Bulgakov created a rich cast of characters and used dialogues and debates to show differences and contradictions, thus demonstrating the carnivalesque nature of the text. With an attempt to provide his answer through the novel, he hoped that people could get rid of limitations and pursue truth and freedom.

Keywords: multi-voice; liberalism; polyphony; The Master and Margarita.

1. Introduction

The Master and Margarita is a magical realist novel by Soviet writer Mikhail Bulgakov, which presents three stories of complex and subtle relationships and themes. In the first story, Satan came to the streets of Moscow and asked the poet if he believed in the existence of God. Under the pressure of society, the poet admitted that he was an atheist. In the second story, Satan revealed the poet's pretense by telling an adapted version of the story of Pilate's trial of Jesus, which was adapted by the hero of the third story, that is, the Master, who is downtrodden by the failure of his writing career and framed by his colleagues. His lover Margarita signed a contract with Satan in order to set the Master's soul free and obtained amazing magical powers. She made a scene in Moscow one night, passed the devil's test, and finally joined the master on the road to freedom.

We believe that Bulgakov's masterpiece, through the use of the technique of polyphony, not only strings together the three levels, but also shows how the narrative technique of polyphonic structure is applied to express a complex and even divisive authorial intent.

2. Three-Part Chorus: Poet, Jesus and Margarita

The concept of polyphony refers to a method of musical composition that includes techniques such as sound relationships between multiple voices, counterpoint, tone-by-tone, transposition and harmony to achieve the effect of harmony, layering and variation between different voices[1]. Bakhtin borrowed this concept into literary theory to refer specifically to the existence of a multitude of separate and disjointed voices and consciousnesses in a literary work, a true polyphony of different voices of sufficient value[2]. Different voices reveal the emotional tone of the hero of the story and fully reflect his emotional changes. More importantly, the coexistence of multiple voices unique to polyphony serves as a metaphor for the spiritual world of the protagonist, which is tangled and full of contradictory tensions.

2.1. The Bass: Dialogue between the Poet and Satan

At the beginning of the book, a soothing bass begins the narrative. In a park at sunset, Berlioz, the editor-in-chief, discussed with Ivan, the poet, whether or not the nativity episode should be deleted. And the passer-by, Satan, questioned the poet in an offensive tone whether he believed in the existence of Jesus, reinforcing the atmosphere of argument. The poet's attitude was passive, and most of the conversation was then left to his colleague Berlioz to answer, implicitly suggesting his

cowardice of knowing but not daring to speak. Satan then recounted the beginning of an adapted version of the story of the trial of Jesus for the two of them, with the high notes appearing and ending abruptly. The poet's mind was greatly shaken, as highlighted by the gap and blank space between the high and low notes, and his inner contradictions and perplexities appeared for the first time.

After the poet was put into the mental hospital, Satan found a few more ordinary people to tease, who were more or less flawed in their honesty and morality. Failing to pass Satan's test, they were thus incarcerated in the mental hospital or disappeared altogether. Here Bulgakov did not use a paraphrased tone, but followed a subtle spatial sequence to discuss those characters, starting with Berlioz at the poet's side and moving on to his roommate and the roommate's superior, each narrated in one chapter. The independent and different thoughts and inner worlds of these characters are like a continuous bass part. Soon afterwards, with the shift of the writer’s perspective, the poet in the asylum met formally with the master, and the bass begins to be interrupted by the master's reminiscences with Margarita.

From the perspective of polyphony, the first part of the story serves as the weak vocal part, like the whisper of Satan in the ear. In this relatively depressing vocal part, the Savior Jesus did not appear, while Satan, the villainous figure of common sense, dominated the development of the plot and guided the poet forward. Under great pain, the poet developed two split personalities debating with each other. Questioning the negative life attitude of the old self, the new self gradually took shape. Eventually the poet transformed from an insensitive person drifting and muddling to a young man whose longing for faith and truth was reignited.

2.2. The Soprano: The Betrayed Jesus - The Missing Protagonist

The soprano is interspersed among the other two layers of the story. When the poet, whose story was like a bass, was mentally annoyed, the soprano would appear. Transitioning through the detailed description of the scenery at the end of the previous chapter, it subtly implied the agony of the poet. This was a written story by the master, re-enacting the episode of Judas betraying Jesus, regretting and committing suicide. The story focused on the portrayal of Pontius Pilate, who was inwardly influenced by Jesus but still had to order the execution of Jesus due to pressure from the superior. He had his men execute Judas in secret in an attempt to make amends for his cowardly act, but waited for 2,000 years to free himself from his guilt until the master, as the original author (his counterpart), declared that he could be set free. Through Pilate, the author repeatedly conveyed Jesus' judgment on such people that cowardice was the worst flaw of mankind. The master also suffered from the same weakness.

In this story, when faced with the similar situation to the master, Jesus chose a more idealistic approach by believing in the truth he recognized. Not wavering in his courage and determination to hold on to the truth in the face of questioning, he calmly accepted his fate. His transcendent and independent qualities, as well as the mystery of the parable itself, give this part of the story the most sublime and powerful tone in the whole piece. Jesus did not appear in the real world, but existed in the words of others. Take the first story as an instance. Twelve writers waited at the supper table for Berlioz, the dead editor-in-chief, for a whole night but he did not show up. This plot is actually implicitly echoing the story of the twelve apostles waiting for Jesus before the Last Supper but failing to get his response[3].Matthew, as the messenger on behalf of Jesus, negotiated with Satan about the end of the master, and decided to bestow him eternal peace, and at the same time forgave Pilate, which ended the book with a soprano with a lingering effect of shock. The disorder of the real world in the text due to the absence of Jesus was made up by the justice and judgment by devil Satan, which further deepened the absurdity of the story and the depth of the narrative.

Bakhtin believed that the Menippean dialogical elements of the Christian literary genre formed a technique of classical contrast unique to the Christian genre, such as Jesus and the unbeliever Pilate in this book. In this story the savior, the governor, and the robber came together as equals, which embodies the surreal and carnivalesque nature of the text[4].

2.3. The Noise: Margarita who betrayed her faith

As the part of story with richest plot, *Margarita* was granted a great deal of freedom, symbolizing the most unstable element. She was not portrayed until the later part of the story, but quickly pushed the plot forward, and connected the three stories.

In the bass, the poet met the master in the mental hospital, where the master recounted his first encounter with *Margarita*. It was at that time when the noise first appeared, leaving a silver lining for the poet who was in poor mental state. Margarita then took up the mission of saving the master. She dared to take up Satan's wager, giving up her otherwise rich life and seemingly perfect marriage to make a scene in Moscow, where she used her magic to punish those who had harmed the master. The climax of the entire story came when Margarita, at Satan's behest, pretended to be Queen Margaret of France and received the guests from Hell. The symbolic coronation ceremony[5].hinted here heralded the carnival-like spirit of breaking the old and establishing the new. At this point the noise dominated and the tempo sped up, showing the author's impulse and genuine yearning for freedom. Before the master and Margarita's souls followed Satan on his journey, their arduous reunion moved the poet. The young man's destiny was thus rewritten and he grew into a reliable and rigorous intellectual.

Margarita's lover, the master, was not elaborated in this part, which in a certain sense meant that the author gave up his dominant first-person point of view. It bestowed the development of the whole story more freedom and helped build up more profound characters. The master's freedom was obtained through the efforts of Margarita, for his cowardly nature made it impossible for him to enter the paradise, but with Margarita's efforts he did not need to go to the hell. In the end, Satan granted the master an ending of restful sleep, which is closest to the path of freedom the master aspired yet could not get in the real life.

3. The Ecstatic Symphony in the Master's Soul

3.1. How the Polyphonic Structure Expresses the Writer's Voice

Analysis of the three stories by adopting the theory of polyphony reveals the writer’s critique of cowardice in human nature. This concept is present in all three stories as well as in readers’ mind, further deepened by different perspectives of the characters. With a separate point of view in each chapter, the writer managed to achieve the shift of space while maintaining a natural coherence of the characters' relationships through dialog. It is as if the play opens and then comes to a wonderful close. Such effect is made even more persuasive, shocking and thought-provoking through the use of polyphony and the performance and overlaying of multiple voices.

The writer retreated again and again, essentially abandoning his first-person narrative perspective while leaving the narration to the cacophonous crowd. Whether it is the timid multitude, the counter-conventional Margarita, or Satan who seemed to let the plot run its course, they are all composing a symphony of bravery and cowardice based on their own different values.

3.2. From Bakhtin's Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics

In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, Bakhtin argued that polyphonic novels, unlike monologue novels, possess a multitude of separate and incompatible voices and consciousnesses, and that a true polyphony consists of voices of sufficient value. Dialogues between multiple protagonists help to discover the mysteries of people's mind and broaden readers' perspectives. Traditional single-line narrative is replaced by multiple-angle narrative techniques. He also mentioned the classical “serio-comic” genre, a term stemmed from ancient Greek civilization. It is indeed the carnivalization of literature, wherein mythological and historical figures from the past are depicted to reflect the time the writer lived and ancient legends are fictionalized, interspersed with manuscripts, retold dialogues and so on.[6]

Bulgakov created a large number of vividly portrayed characters throughout the book, who had independent personalities and behaviors whether or not they were protagonists. Dialogue and debate

are the most frequently used techniques to show the divergence between characters, and the comicality of people's discourse reflects the carnivalesque nature of the text, which relativizes all apparently stable and established concepts, while the truth still needs to be searched for. As Bakhtin put it, "nothing conclusive has yet taken place in the world…The world is open and free." Thus apart from judgments of cowardice and lying, the author did not leave any certain conclusion. Open conclusions are not only a trait of polyphonic novel, but also its essence: the suspension of judgment implies not only intellectual courage, but probably also intellectual indecision.

4. Conclusion: the fruit of freedom obtained by the master is quite bitter

After the master was put into the mental hospital, he swore to give up everything he had, but it was Margarita's persistence that won him the freedom. Such a result is related to the writer Bulgakov's experience, who was in the same despair as the master when mediating on the ending of the story. He wished to give up everything and completely disappear from the world, while his wife begged him to "give the master a better ending", which finally brought the master and Margarita to an open ending.

The writer Bulgakov was first appreciated by Stalin for his dramas but then was boycotted by the literary circle, with his works being banned and his talent could not be given full play. The numerous metaphors and allusions in *The Master and Margarita* reflect the writer's misfortunes. It is precisely due to the sense of impotence the writer felt in reality that Margarita and her entourage from hell could take their revenge in the novel, destroying the apartment of the Writers' Association and blowing up the building of the Moscow Writers' Association. The author's regret lurks underneath the writing. Is it possible that only extraordinary people with amazing magical powers can escape from their unfortunate destinies? In the story, the master and Margarita found the answer to this question with the help of others. Thus the fruit of freedom at the end of the novel is more like a reward for the readers who have also been touched, and freedom here is more like a truly magical end.

Bulgakov explores the themes of modernity, morality and freedom in a symbolist manner. The conflict between art and reality and moral dilemmas in the pursuit of free will are often the central concerns of modern art. The crisis of modernity has led to a lack of faith, and it has become a difficult mission for human beings to legislate for themselves and give value to their existence. In this sense, Bulgakov gave his own answer: he hoped that mankind could get rid of the biggest limitation, that is, cowardice. If they fail to do so, it would be better for their souls to die out in the world. But if one does not want this to happen, then he must search for his inner values and bring back the missing "God".

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