

## ***Heart of a Dog* (1925), Mikhail Bulgakov,**

Bulgakov's novella *Heart of a Dog* tells the story of an experiment gone badly wrong in 1920s Moscow. A Professor plucks a hungry stray dog off the streets, performs an operation to implant the pituitary gland from a criminal's corpse into the dog's body, and creates a grotesque human-canine hybrid called Sharikov. Professor Preobrazhensky realises his mistake once his creation runs riot in his household and starts to persecute him, in league with the local Soviet authorities. Just in time, the Professor turns him back into Sharik the dog, outfoxing the Soviet authorities who are trying in vain to investigate what has happened to their protégé.

The novella owes much to *Frankenstein* and to writers of science fiction and fantasy, such as H. G. Wells. Bulgakov was also genuinely interested in contemporary scientific research, including by members of his own family, into whether genes, hormones or environment (or some combination of them) were the biggest influence on the human personality. However, when he submitted his text for consideration with a Soviet journal in 1925, all the Soviet authorities could see was 'a lampoon on the Soviet way of life', and they categorically banned its publication. They viewed it as an allegory of how the revolution had failed in its fundamental aim of transforming the population, and especially the working class (proletariat), into 'new Soviet people': true believers in communism, ready to work, study and make personal sacrifices for the Soviet cause.

This was not the first time that Bulgakov suffered censorship, and it was far from the last: throughout the 1920s and 1930s, until his 1940 death, many of his works of prose and drama were rejected by Soviet publishing houses and theatres as anti-Soviet, or at least not pro-Soviet enough. He never even tried to publish his masterpiece novel *The Master and Margarita*, which develops the 'magic realism' of *Heart of a Dog* into a technicolour satire of Stalinist Moscow. He wrote that novel for the 'desk drawer', and it was only published posthumously, albeit a quarter of a century earlier than *Heart of a Dog*. The latter was only released in 1987, during the era of *glasnost*, when criticisms of Stalinism and Soviet power finally became possible. *Heart of a Dog* was one of the defining cultural events of the last years of communism, made into a hugely popular film (see below) and adapted for the theatre, including a sell-out Moscow production of the late 1980s. At this time, it was largely celebrated as an anti-Soviet allegory (much as it had been criticised for the same thing in the 1920s). However, the novella is arguably more ambiguous than that.

Here are **some questions** to explore these ambiguities:

- Professor Preobrazhensky (whose name means ‘transformation’ and carries divine connotations) was often viewed, especially in glasnost, as a heroic spokesperson against Bolshevik terror and the philistinism of post-revolutionary life. Do you agree with this wholly positive view?
- Bulgakov often wrote about scientists and scientific experiments in the 1920s (and he himself was a doctor before turning to writing). One of his leading biographers, Julie Curtis, suggests that Bulgakov saw the best scientists as much like creative writers or artists. Do you think Preobrazhensky (or his assistant Bormental’) can be viewed in this way?
- How many narrators are there in the novella, and how reliable is each of them? How do these narrators and the shifts between them affect our view of Sharik(ov), Preobrazhensky, and the experiment?
- One of the key themes of the novella is pressure on housing, and more broadly, on private space: an issue that Bulgakov grappled with in 1920s Moscow. The professor is adamant, in the face of the housing committee’s demands, that he needs a large number of rooms for his work and lifestyle. Do you agree? Does the novella ultimately argue in favour of private life free of state control?
- Why does the experiment go wrong, and do we ever fully understand why Sharikov turns out the way that he does? Does the professor, and do we, solve the mystery of what determines human personality and behaviour?
- Despite the ban on *Heart of a Dog*, satire was very popular and often permitted for publication in the 1920s Soviet Union. What sorts of satire do you think would have been acceptable to the Soviet authorities, and why was *Heart of a Dog* so unacceptable at the time?
- What types of comedy can we find in the novella (e.g. farce, slapstick, satire...)? Do the politicised, and rather serious, readings of the novella above misrepresent the genre and tone of the work?

**Further reading/watching:**

- Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita* is one of the most important and enjoyable works of 20<sup>th</sup>-c. Russian literature. From the same era as *Heart*, but more realist and serious, is his *Young Doctor’s Notebook*.
- The 1988 film adaptation of *Heart of a Dog* by the film director Vladimir Bortko has never been bettered. Here is a subtitled version: <https://sovietmoviesonline.com/comedy/sobache-serdce>

- A very readable short biography of Bulgakov's extraordinary life by Julie Curtis:  
<http://www.reaktionbooks.co.uk/display.asp?ISB=9781780237411>

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