

Reading the Readers' Texts: Fanfiction and Classic Novels¹

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Abstract: The article focuses on the multiple approaches to literary masterpieces in digital culture, especially in the cases when the process and circumstances of their reading provokes writing, giving rise to genre variations of contemporary fanfiction works and the resulting readers' responses. The Russian novel *The Master and Margarita*, by Mikhail Bulgakov, by now recognized as a classic text of the 20th century, is used as an illustration of these tendencies. The digital environment gives a new life to Bulgakov's novel, mainly through localization, visualization, and gamification. Online communication stimulates the search for and sharing of cultural information about the text and its author, expands the opportunities for storage and archiving, and connects those who want to base their reading and writing on the classic work.

Keywords: classic novels, digital reading, digital writing, fanfiction, Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*

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Digital reading is one of the major issues jointly explored by digital humanities and literary studies. This collaboration is made possible by the digitization of classic texts and their accessibility in online libraries as well as by various other forms of e-reading and re-writing. The nature of reading has evolved and is perceived differently, as pointed out by Alexander Kiossev: “the zapping, surfing, ‘reading’ on the screen of the smartphone, etc., the multi-channel control of multiple screens have not only optimistic apologists, but also serious critics and opponents.”² Digital reading should be studied as a phenomenon of digital culture from a positive perspective in order to develop the necessary and adequate parameters for building digital collections and digital libraries, for digitizing print texts, and for creating and disseminating new digital ones, accessible only on the internet.

The reading context undoubtedly affects the act of digital reading, so the effect of context and the preferred medium carrying the text are the subjects of separate studies, such as the one by Burke and Bon.³ The results of this study show that the reading of literary texts on paper continues to be active enough, hence the search for print books, but that the students surveyed read mostly from their laptops, followed by those who preferred mobile devices. Although they are still in the “hybrid readers” group – reading both from physical books and from electronic devices – they tend to turn into “post-hybrid readers.” The preferences of those who read and study literature are not only for digital devices. They are also for reading in the interactive environment of the Internet, so it is important that well-known high quality literary texts, critical commentaries on individual works, and literary history are present online as well. A novel by the 20th century Russian writer Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita* (1940), is used here as a textual basis to illustrate some of the above-mentioned tendencies.

The multilingual digital fixation on Bulgakov himself and on the characters of his novel *The Master and Margarita*, which takes the form of a geographically extended attention in some cases, is a consequence of the processes of a cultural intermediation that has many definitions and even more academic interpretations. For the purpose of exploring digital culture and the ways in which canonical texts become part of the intermedia environment, media domination is associated with changing the forms of creation, presentation, description, understanding,

² Александър Кьосев, *Караниците около четенето*. София: Сиела, 2013. [Aleksandar Kiossev, *Karanicite okolo cheteneto*. Sofia: Ciela, 2013] 548. The translations of all quotes are mine.

³ Michael Burke and Esmeralda Bon, “The location and means of literary reading,” in *Expressive minds and artistic creations: studies in cognitive poetics*, ed. Csábi, Szilvia, (Oxford University Press, 2018), 205-231.

analysis, evaluation, and criticism in the application of ICT in the process of socio-technical integration. These developments have opened the way to the new environments of literature where, in another virtual reality (given that literature creates one), at least two generations living in the digital age are reading and writing together.

The digital environment gives a new life to Bulgakov's novel mostly through localization, visualization, and gamification. At the same time, the internet stimulates the search for and sharing of cultural information about the text and its author, including its storage and archiving, and connects those who want to base their reading and writing on this classic text. From the very outset of the massive search and online discussion the novel's presence on the internet at various levels – from academic discussions to popular discussions in social networks – localization and the topic of location have been the focus of projects aiming at mapping and visualizing the places in the novel.⁴ An academic example of this is the project of Kevin Moss, set up in 1998 for teaching purposes, which is still available in all its segments.⁵ On this site, static maps point to topoi in Moscow, Jerusalem, and throughout Russia, to which the author has sent his characters. This project, realized with the technological capabilities from the end of the last century, can be considered a veritable piece of cyber archeology, taking a notable place in the online history of *The Master and Margarita*. Digital interactive maps also support the reading of the novel and suggest new directions in its interpretation. Such an online map is available on Jan Vanhelemont's web site dedicated to the novel,⁶ where public buildings, streets, and homes connecting the real Moscow with the fictional city of *The Master and Margarita* can be visited and viewed, and where one can choose virtual tours or plan real ones when visiting contemporary Moscow. Depending on the reader's attitude and purpose, the virtual platform allows cultural facts and literary and historical research to be included, as well as immersion in the story, because the interactive map strengthens the illusion of presence and testimony. We are tempted to compare the experience of the 21st-century individual looking at the digital maps online and playing with the scale of objects: from the concrete building and street to the satellite view of the whole city, continent, and planet, with the imagination of Bulgakov, namely, with

⁴ Ksenia Isaeva, [10 places in Moscow from Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*](#), accessed February 12, 2020,; [Bulgakovskaya Moskva](#), accessed February 12, 2020.

⁵ *Master & Margarita*, accessed February 12, 2020, <http://cr.middlebury.edu/>

⁶ *Master & Margarita*, accessed February 12, 2020, <http://www.masterandmargarita.eu/>

Margarita's flying over and beyond Moscow or the "live" globe of Woland. She describes the experience in the following way:

My globe is much more convenient, especially as I need exact information. Do you see that little speck of land, for instance, washed by the sea on one side? Look, it's just bursting into flames. War has broken out there. If you look closer you'll see it in detail.

Margarita leaned towards the globe and saw that the little square of land was growing bigger, emerging in natural colours and turning into a kind of relief map. Then she saw a river and a village beside it. A house the size of a pea grew until it was as large as a matchbox.⁷

The technological applications available today not only profanize the magical vision of Bulgakov's novel, but also give a new perspective on the reader's reflections and on the novel's creative interpretations. Obviously, Bulgakov was extremely perceptive, not only regarding the human soul, but also regarding the future of humanity, as his written thoughts were bound to come true eventually. In this particular example, the satellite view of the Earth's surface was realized soon enough: within half a century after the publication of the novel.

In the global network, Bulgakov's novel has been forgotten neither by travel agencies that offer excursions to the readers of *The Master and Margarita* nor by the creators of novel-based musical and visual works, nor by those who make new products using the novel as a recognizable brand under the principles of transmedia storytelling. One example of the many aspects of the visual presentation of the novel on the internet. Bulgakov's novel, born as a book in the twentieth century, apart from its other incarnations in text, picture and sound on the internet, exists in the multicolored and multifaceted digital images of multilingual book covers. For the internet fan community of *The Master and Margarita* these have turned into collectible digital objects. Various platforms and web sites display collections of cover art, and the images added by the readers are accompanied by information and comments demonstrating not only knowledge of the minute details of the work and its history, but also personal narratives of the users associated with the novel. Thus, the memory of Bulgakov's text is also supported by the images of the covers and by other personal texts, which signals the many reflections of this literary work on a multitude of consciousnesses for the duration of several decades.

In addition, the interest in the novel in the digital environment is demonstrated in one of the dominant features of digital culture, gamification: the tendency to participate in and to create

⁷ Mikhail Bulgakov, *The Master and Margarita*, accessed February 12, 2020
<https://weblitera.com/book/?id=205&lng=1&ch=22&l=>

games of a different type, which is characteristic of the millennial generation. Quizzes, tests, games, and quests on Bulgakov's works and especially the novel *The Master and Margarita* are abundantly available in the Russian language on the internet, and the explanation can be sought not only in the popularity of the text among readers/users on the web and its presence both in school and university programs.⁸ The work itself is marked by games, masquerade, and ludicrous acts, both challenging and allowing the text to be reshaped and remodeled, transforming the characters, playing with the scenes, and transporting the action and the characters through time and space.

Bulgakov's novel is a text full of secrets and mysteries, meaningful names and wordplay, as evidenced both by academic research and by the wider readership who have demonstrated their awareness of these features of the novel on the internet. One such example is the project of Sergei Melnikov, himself a programmer and poet, who offers not only gaming suggestions (such as crossword puzzles, poems) but also a brief statistical analysis of the text, from which it is apparent that the highest frequency among all names mentioned in the novel belongs to that of Margarita (420 times). This fact is convincing proof of the claim that the most active role in the plot is ascribed to the title heroine. More importantly, however, for the purpose of the analysis here is that on this particular website, the critical analysis, the creative products, the reader's opinions, the fan texts, and the references to other places on the web are presented all-in-one, on one page with hypertext links, united solely by the name of Bulgakov and his work.⁹ The project, designed to organize the online readings of the novel (alongside other similar projects: *Karenina. Live Edition* (2014) and *Chekhov is Alive* (2015)), entitled *The Master and Margarita. I Was There*,¹⁰ can also be considered as a kind of game. What is new in this project is the intention to

⁸ Dozens of websites offer such tests and quizzes, study assignments designed for extra work in high school or popular tests for all ages, including recorded radio shows. Some examples may be seen on the following websites: [Learning apps](#), accessed February 9, 2020; [Moe obrazovanie](#), accessed February 9, 2020; [Populyarnye testy](#) [Popular tests], accessed February 9, 2020; [Radio Mayak](#), accessed February 9, 2020.

⁹ Online igry ... [Online games ...], accessed February 16, 2020, <http://www.iqfun.ru/articles/master-i-margarita-stat.shtml>.

¹⁰ "Master and Margarita. I was there," accessed February 16, 2020, <https://masterimargarita.withgoogle.com/>. As the website of the project states, "Master and Margarita. I was there" is "a unique multimedia project combining classic literature and modern technology. On November 11 and 12, 2016, hundreds of people read this great novel live, and the audience witnessed the immersion of the reader in the scene of the novel, including the 360 format!" The videos of the readings are available online and they make the novel come to life through the faces and voices of the devoted readers. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gtQq90h1_ZQ&index=1&list=PLpObgN0-VtFtOrwN-VYt9pNMeSmxWp4kc, accessed February 16, 2020).

Another form of participation of readers in a collective cultural event, a great excuse for literature, is the competition for reading literary works held in Russia among young people. The title of the project clearly states its idea – to

employ virtual movement and the immersion of the readers in various places related to Bulgakov's novel. The spatial aspect of the project stems from the very nature of the novel, which has been analyzed in great depth during the last half century from the perspective of chronotope and the possibilities for deployment in the new technogenic digital environment.

In the mosaic of the transmedia reproduction of the narrative, which is characteristic of modern digital culture, a significant role is played by the phenomena of fanfiction and fan art. The number of fan texts in general depends on the popularity of a literary work among the generation of active participants in online communication and on the presence of the text in the literary canon. The internet is an environment that undoubtedly favors the flourishing of fanfiction. During the last three decades, the web has changed the usual practices of fanfiction for readers and writers alike. It has made significantly easier not only communication and online publishing, the usage of various creative approaches to the ubiquitous internet resources, the personal, active, free, and creative participation in the fan community, but also the scholarly observation and research of the texts made available online, traceable with respect to the dynamics of the development of ideas, stories, and genres. The directions in which these interdisciplinary studies have developed have repeatedly been the object of study in many articles and books, with a focus on the fans' works, their inventions, and the rhetorical strategies they use to create meaning.¹¹ The origins of fanfiction studies are associated with the work of Henry Jenkins, who helped to "establish the study of fandom as a distinctive research project, emerging from the study of subcultures, readers, or audiences, all paradigms with a longer history in British Cultural Studies and elsewhere."¹²

Apart from the globally popular novels and films such as *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, *The Lord of the Rings* that have spawned multiple works of different genres and formats, one can find works by Russian writers that have triggered the creation of societies, the online publishing and discussion of school classics, of literary texts and personalities from the twentieth century, and of contemporary science fiction and fantasy novels on Russian fanfiction websites. One example is

make the classics come to life. More than one hundred and fifty individual recordings, presented by young readers, are available on the website of this Russian competition aiming to stimulate the reading of classics by students(<https://youngreaders.ru/audiobiblioteka/>, accessed February 16, 2020).

¹¹ Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, eds. *The Fan Fiction Studies Reader* (University of Iowa Press, 2014), 1.

¹² Henry Jenkins, Where Fandom Studies Came From: An Interview with Kristina Busse and Karen Hellekson (Part One), November 17, 2014, <http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2014/11/where-fandom-studies-came-from-an-interview-with-kristina-busse-and-karen-hellekson-part-one.html>, accessed February 16, 2020.

the *Russian Classical Literature – The Russian Classic Society*,¹³ where in the list of themes of fanfiction – a basis for creative interpretation – the first positions, based on the number of publications of fanfic texts, as expected, belong to the novel *Eugene Onegin* by Alexander Pushkin (64), followed by *War and Peace* by Leo Tolstoy (39) and *Crime and Punishment* by Feodor Dostoevsky (36), while *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov (17) is the first work of the 20th century to find its place among these time-honored classics. However, on another popular specialized site,¹⁴ the performance of Bulgakov’s novel far surpassed the other novels mentioned above: *Eugene Onegin* (372), *War and Peace* (191), *Crime and Punishment* (152), *The Master and Margarita* (658 publications).

Sequels to *The Master and Margarita* can be read in various places online: from personal pages and blogs¹⁵ through literary sites to fanfic online territories, united by the novel’s fandom. Romantic encounters and separations of the characters; strange adventures; changes in the time and place of the original novel (from the 20th to the 21st century; from Moscow, to St. Petersburg); Bulgakov himself appearing as a character; Nabokov, too, appearing as a guest in the eternal home of the Master; and the returning of Woland are only a few examples from the countless new versions, collages, and parodies of the novel. All of these are made possible and visible owing to the technogenic digital environment.

The main themes and trends in fandom writings are difficult to systematize. However, it is possible to trace, for example, the selection of characters from the novel that have been further developed in the fanfic versions, or the crossings with other works by including their characters in the world of *The Master and Margarita*. Margarita, Woland, and Behemoth more than anyone else enjoy the greatest popularity as characters in fanfic texts, as well as on the many book covers.

While tracking the combinations and crosses between *The Master and Margarita* and other texts, it becomes apparent that the degree of involvement, merging, and transfiguration

¹³ <http://m.diary.ru/~russian-classic/?tags>, accessed February 16, 2020.

¹⁴ Книга фанфиков [Book of fanfic], accessed February 16, 2020, <https://ficbook.net/fanfiction>.

¹⁵ Personal blogs may be a specific object of interest. Their authors all over the world comment on Bulgakov’s novel and react to each new translations and publication of this classical Russian novel. The presence of the themes of *Master and Margarita* in the Bulgarian blogosphere, where representatives of different generations write about the novel, is all the more worthy of the researcher's attention. Here are some examples of such sites on the internet: <http://knigolandia.info/book-review/maistora-i-margarita/>, http://zonkobg.blogspot.com/2009/02/blog-post_28.html; http://neonula.blogspot.com/2017/07/blog-post_3.html; creativu.bg/майстора-и-маргарита/; <https://annahells.wordpress.com/2017/06/12/майстора-и-маргарита-2/>, accessed February 16, 2020.

from one text to another varies in the creation of a crossover – one of the fanfiction subgenres – between popular contemporary works (such as *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*) and literary classics (*Faust* and *Anna Karenina*, for example). The degree of workmanship, originality, mastery, and erudition shown by the authors of fanfiction also differs and obviously depends on the strong connection between the stages of the reading–writing–reading process developed in the digital environment.

Out of this brief review of the many different transmedia variants online of *The Master and Margarita* – a novel that draws the attention of professionals and amateurs, corporations and personalities – in contemporary digital culture arises the legitimate question about the reasons for this abundance. Undoubtedly, the novel poses questions of its own that are considered by many to be universal. Another reason could be the novel’s multigenre character, which lends itself to re-writings. Yet for the purposes of this study, it is more important that many fanfic writers recognize as readers of *The Master and Margarita* a lot of aspects of the novel which are both provocative and productive for fanfiction writing: parallel reality, incarnations, fantasy, and magic.

The novel offers a brave game involving the innermost realm and the sacred, and in turn provokes such a game. The very text of the Russian writer can be classified as a crossover, where heroes from the New Testament, mythology, historical chronicles, novels, and encyclopedias participate and act. This is why the novel provokes re-reading and re-writing. The potential for the expansion of the storyline with more stories is remarkable, while the text is open to all possible deployments of lateral and creative lines of history. Simultaneously, it is noticeable that the social and political aspects of the original, the names and signs of Bulgakov’s time, almost entirely disappear, and what remains is the layer related to cultural tradition and the eternal themes – the Human and the Devil, the Human and God. These derivative works are enriched by the familiar reality of the 21st century: the modern city, the networked world of digital communication, which in turn is colored and supplemented by the desired alternative realities created by fans, commented on by themselves, and multiplied by their passion to write and their habit to read.

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