

Behemoth, in *The Master and Margarita*

by GREG BALAGIAN



Russia issued this die cut souvenir sheet last June commemorating author Mikhail Bulgakov (1891-1940). Behemoth is the cat in his novel, *The Master and Margarita*, pictured in the left selvage and enlarged at the left. Devilish Behemoth is reaching for the moon. See the Mew Listing for Russia 7730 on page 35.

Behemoth is a feline character in the novel, *The Master and Margarita*, a satire on Russian society by the great Russian writer and playwright Michail Bulgakov (1891-1940).

Behemoth is an enormous demonic black cat who portrays a combination of reality and fantasy. He speaks, walks on two legs, plays chess and can even transform into a human with a "catlike mug" for brief periods. At times, he even acts like a cat when grooming or jumping.

The cat's name comes from the Russian "Begemot" which means "hippopotamus" due to his size, and has references in Biblical literature as the beast in Job.** Behemoth often accompanies the character Woland who is actually Satan.

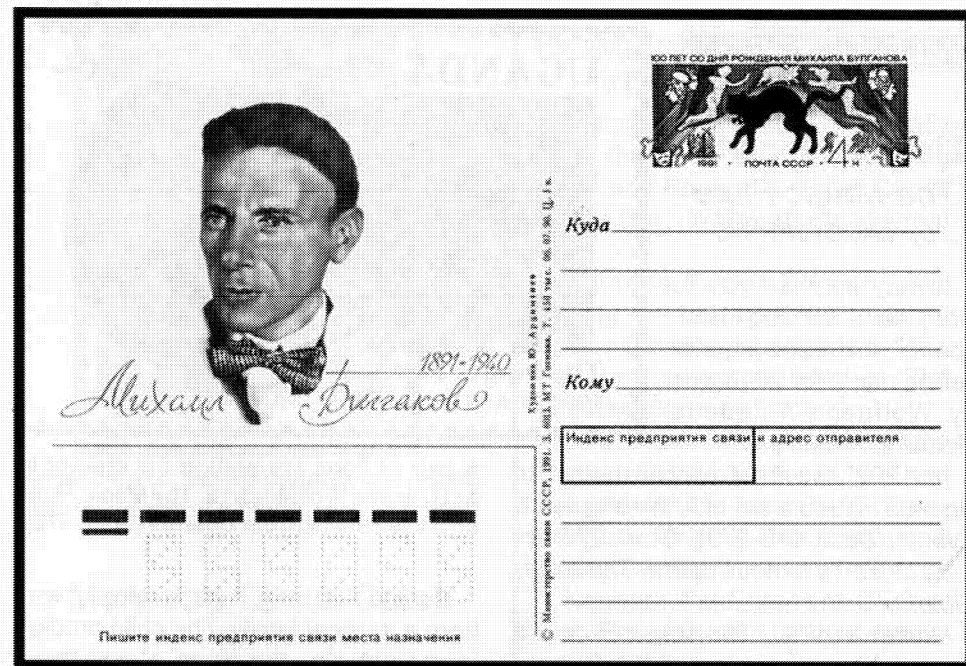
The novel, written between 1928 and 1940, consists of conflicting themes like good and evil, innocence and guilt, truth

and lies, and atheism and Christianity. Behemoth's character can be quite malicious verbally and physically, especially when he uses his can of kerosene.

Russia issued a souvenir sheet honoring Bulgakov on the 125th anniversary of his birth (Scott 7730, listed on page 35). Bulgakov is on the single stamp and Behemoth is on the left side of the selvage grabbing for the moon, with its connotation of witchcraft and magic.

The inscription next to the cat comes from chapter 28 of the novel. A crony of Woland, named Koroviev, is trying to enter a store with Behemoth, but was denied entry by a watchman who says, "Cats are not allowed." They finally are permitted into the store with some help and proceed to create chaos.

During Bulgakov's lifetime, the Soviet public generally did not like cats, consider-



This postal card was issued by Russia for the centennial of Bulgakov's birth in 1991. The black cat on the indicium is Behemoth from his novel, *The Master and Margarita*, along with other characters.

ing them to be a symbol of a sinister and alien lifestyle. People were often afraid of having pet cats, believing them to be demons. Behemoth plays into these fears by being cast as a devil's disciple.

Despite the bad reputation foisted on cats, Bulgakov and his wife kept a pet cat named Flushka that his wife thought was very lovely and smart. Some literary critics believe that Bulgakov's cat was the prototype for Behemoth.†

Mikhail Bulgakov was born in Kiev, Ukraine. He graduated from the Medical School of Kiev University as a physician, but gave up medicine for literature after a few years.

His first major novel, *The White Guard* (1926), was criticized for its lack of a communist hero, and was ultimately banned. His subsequent books, also quite critical of Soviet communist society, were

denounced. Joseph Stalin banned publication of Bulgakov's work in 1930 and denied the author permission to emigrate.

Twenty-six years following Bulgakov's death from an inherited kidney disease, his widow was able to have *The Master and Margarita* published.🐾

Notes and Partial List of Sources

**References to Behemoth as a monster and/or the Devil are in Job 40:15-24 and Jewish apocalyptic literature.

†Edgar Allan Poe also patterned his evil cat Pluto in the story, "The Black Cat," after his own beloved pet.

*Bulgakov, Mikhail. *The Master & Margarita*. www.masterandmargarita.eu

Nekrasova, Liubov. "Cat Behemoth in M. Bulgakov's Novel, *The Master & Margarita*-The Character for Communication." *Moscow State Univ., Journal of Internat'l Scientific Pub.*, 65-72 (2015).