

[Heart of a Dog \(1925\), by Mikhail Bulgakov](#) ^[1]

By: Kim, Grace Keywords: [Eugenics](#) ^[2] [Science Fiction](#) ^[3] [Satire](#) ^[4]

Соба́чье се́рдце (*Heart of a Dog*) is a novella written in 1925 by author and playwright Mikhail Bulgakov in Moscow, USSR, later Russia. An early English translation was published in 1968. *Heart of a Dog* tells the story of a stray [dog](#) ^[5] named Sharik, who is found by a surgeon, and undergoes extensive surgery for experimental purposes to create a New Soviet man, someone committed to the ideals of communism in the Soviet Union. In *Heart of a Dog*, Bulgakov satirizes the communist revolution in the Soviet Union and the concept of a New Soviet man, and criticizes the science and practice of [eugenics](#) ^[6].

In the early 1900s, the people of Russia experienced a political shift towards communism, an ideology that absolved people of social class and standing and also promoted the ideas of common ownership. The Communist Party in the Soviet Union heavily promoted ideals and values of communism that were to be reflected through the people, thus the New Soviet Man. During that time, Soviet physicians and medical researchers promoted [eugenics](#) ^[6], the belief that selective reproduction which increases positive genetic traits and decreases negative traits in [humans](#) ^[7] will improve the quality of later generations. They advocated that communistic values and ideals were hereditary traits that could be passed down to future generations and encouraged those who had traits considered desirable to reproduce to improve the Soviet people.

The shift in politics led the Soviet government to promote ideas and concepts like the New Economic Policy and the New Soviet Man. The New Economic Policy aimed to enable the freedom and equality of social class, which in turn allowed all workers of the state to keep some of their produced goods in order to sell for their own benefit rather than giving up all of the produced goods to the state. The New Soviet Man was considered to be a man who supported the ideals and policies of communism in the Soviet Union, and who pursued education, especially in science. Soviet women also were encouraged to work alongside men to help increase production. The ideas and beliefs of communism were dispersed through educational and artistic outlets.

During the early 1900s, the Soviet Union encouraged physicians and scientists to focus their research efforts in [eugenics](#) ^[6] as a means to better the Soviet race. Physicians travelled outside of the Soviet Union and learned of the [eugenics movement](#) ^[8] taking place in the Western world, including the US. The Soviet Union encouraged the theory that those with desirable traits should continue to reproduce to ensure that those traits would continue to get passed down in future generations (positive [eugenics](#) ^[6]). It also claimed that bad traits, like alcoholism and violence, were likewise hereditary, and that those with those traits should not reproduce (negative [eugenics](#) ^[6]). Many Soviet medical researchers, scientists, and physicians said that communistic ideologies and values were also heritable traits that could be passed down in future generations.

Bulgakov wrote the novella *Heart of a Dog* as satire to criticize the Soviet Union and the practice of [eugenics](#) ^[6]. Prior to the start of Bulgakov's career as a writer, he practiced medicine as a physician for the military. After the political upheaval in the late 1910s, Bulgakov stopped practicing medicine and instead focused on his career in writing.

Heart of a Dog has nine chapters followed by an epilogue. Bulgakov begins the first chapter in the perspective of a stray [dog](#) ^[5] later called Sharik, a word used to describe a pampered, purebred [dog](#) ^[5]. In the story, Sharik digs around the street trash for food during a wintery day when a cook finds him and scalds him with boiling water. Sharik is injured and as he is contemplating his death, a surgeon named Philip Philipovich Preobrazhensky, his name meaning he who transforms or transfigures, finds Sharik on the street. Preobrazhensky feeds the [dog](#) ^[5] some sausage and decides to take Sharik home with him. Sharik is grateful for being spared and promises to worship Preobrazhensky for the rest of his life.

The second and third chapters of the book detail Sharik's acclimation to his new home. In the second chapter, Sharik gets acquainted with Preobrazhensky's home, and Bulgakov introduces Doctor Ivan Arnoldovich Bormenthal, Preobrazhensky's student, Zinaida Prokofievna, and Darya Petrovna Ivanova, Preobrazhensky's female servants. Prokofievna and Ivanova clean and feed Sharik while Preobrazhensky and Bormenthal work together to see and treat patients throughout the day. Preobrazhensky works as a physician for the Communist Party, which enables him to leverage some power against certain policies. Bulgakov implies in the novel that these policies mock communistic values. In the third chapter, Sharik becomes a house-trained [dog](#) ^[5], and his health improves. Prokofievna and Ivanova continue looking after Sharik, and Prokofievna begins to take Sharik out on walks, keeping Sharik on a leash.

In the fourth chapter, Bulgakov reveals the underlying intentions of Preobrazhensky. In the beginning of the fourth chapter, Sharik wakes up with no appetite and a feeling of dread. Bormenthal arrives at the Preobrazhensky household with news of a fresh

cadaver. Preobrazhensky has his female servants prep the surgical room so that Preobrazhensky and Bormenthal can operate on Sharik. Bulgakov implies that they intend to use organs of the cadaver and transplant them on Sharik with the hopes of creating a New Soviet Man as a means to improve the Soviet race. Sharik is anesthetized and Preobrazhensky transplants a human [pituitary gland](#)^[9] and human testicles into Sharik. Bormenthal notes that the organs were from an alcoholic thief. Preobrazhensky and Bormenthal repeatedly inject [hormones](#)^[10] to keep Sharik alive, and they worry that Sharik will not make it through the operation.

In the fifth chapter, Bulgakov switches perspectives and tells the story through Bormenthal's operation notes over the span of three weeks, from December 23 to January 17. In his surgical notes, Bormenthal discusses the operation and then the state of Sharik following the operation. Sharik is depicted as barely recovering from the operation and then transitioning from his [dog](#)^[5]-like self to a primitive human being. Sharik regains his appetite and begins to eat human food. He learns to form words and to read. Sharik slowly adapts to the concept of clothing and learns to dress himself. Sharik also begins to smoke. The novella implies that Sharik's ability to conduct himself in a human-like manner, such as dressing himself and engaging in higher-level activities, such as smoking, demonstrates the success of the operation and that he is acting like a New Soviet Man.

In the sixth chapter, Bulgakov shifts perspective again and describes how Sharik adjusts to his human role. Bulgakov writes the sixth chapter in third person, meaning the story is now told in a narrator perspective rather than from Sharik's or Bormenthal's perspectives. In the chapter, Sharik forms a human identity and demands the name Polygraph Polygraphovich Sharikov. Preobrazhensky and Bormenthal attempt to teach Sharik basic etiquette, such as chewing with his mouth closed and not swearing, but Sharik refuses, acting in an animalistic way. Sharik wreaks havoc in the Preobrazhensky's household, chasing after a stray cat in the house and breaking a pipe, causing the house to flood. Preobrazhensky takes leave from his medical work to clean up after Sharik. Bulgakov implies that Sharik struggles between his [dog](#)^[5]-like identity and his human-like identity and also illustrates that the operation may not have been as successful as Preobrazhensky and Bormenthal had thought.

In the seventh chapter, Preobrazhensky and Bormenthal discuss how much money has been lost because Preobrazhensky has not been able to see and treat his patients due to the broken pipe. Preobrazhensky and Bormenthal demand compensation from Sharik, and lecture him to behave. Sharik is reprimanded for sexually harassing women on the street and is reminded to be a good, well-behaved citizen. Preobrazhensky and Bormenthal's scolding is a reference to the concept of the New Soviet Man, which encourages people to become selfless, healthy, fit, and enthusiastic community members as part of the Socialist Revolution.

In the eighth chapter, Bormenthal begs Preobrazhensky to allow him to kill Sharik. Bormenthal and Preobrazhensky discuss the mental strain and stress Sharik has caused them. Preobrazhensky admits that Sharik is the way he is because of the operation. Preobrazhensky claims that because the organs he transplanted into Sharik were from an unfit person, an alcoholic thief, they caused Sharik to be defective. Bormenthal suggests that they redo the operation, using donated organs from a fit person, a genius. Preobrazhensky decides against the idea and concludes that [eugenics](#)^[6] is a waste of time. Bulgakov implies that bad traits, such as alcoholism and criminal activity, are hereditary traits that could be passed on in later generations, a concept of [eugenics](#)^[6]. As Sharik had received bad traits, it explained why he demonstrated bad behavior, such as acts of violence.

In the ninth chapter, Sharik gets a government job. His choice indicates that Sharik embodies the concept of the New Soviet Man by wanting to work and produce goods for the State. His job is to kill stray cats, and Sharik is not home as often because of his job. Two days later, Sharik brings home a woman, announcing to Preobrazhensky and Bormenthal that he would like his own room to share with his new wife. Preobrazhensky intervenes, pulling the woman into his office so that he can speak privately with her. Preobrazhensky admits to the woman that Sharik was an experiment gone wrong, and the woman leaves the household in tears. Sharik threatens her, and Bormenthal beats Sharik again, ensuring that Sharik does not act on his words. Sharik later is caught sexually assaulting Prokofievna, and Bormenthal gives Sharik another beating, forcing Sharik to apologize for his actions. Sharik leaves the household and denounces Preobrazhensky and Bormenthal to the Communist Party. However, due to Preobrazhensky's position of power, the Party does not act on Sharik's denouncement, and Preobrazhensky and Bormenthal are not arrested. Preobrazhensky orders Sharik to leave the household, and Sharik refuses, pulling out a gun. Preobrazhensky and Bormenthal fight Sharik.

Bulgakov ends the story with an epilogue in which Sharik has returned to his original [dog](#)^[5]-like self. While Preobrazhensky claims that the reversal is naturally occurring, it is revealed that Preobrazhensky and Bormenthal reversed the operation. The novella ends with Sharik enjoying his life as a [dog](#)^[5] and notices that Preobrazhensky brought home another human brain and removed the human [pituitary gland](#)^[9], indicating that Sharik has retained some of his memories of his operation or that Preobrazhensky intends to carry out another similar experiment.

When *Heart of a Dog* was written in 1925, the Soviet Union government encouraged readings, thoughts, and speeches that promoted the ideas and values of communism and restricted the expression and publication of contrary views. Historian George Lensen acknowledged that many literary writers and artists in the Soviet Union felt limited in their creativity due to the pressure to

produce works that reflected solely communistic values and ideas. Because of these restrictions, *Heart of a Dog* was translated into English and published in 1968 outside of the Soviet Union before it was published officially in the Soviet Union in 1987. However, prior to 1987, opponents of the ideologies of the Soviet Union distributed the novella through samizdat, a method of rebellious activity that involves passing restricted documents by hand from reader to reader. When it was eventually published, *Heart of a Dog* reviewers outside the Soviet Union praised the book as satire that exposed hypocrisy in communistic ideals.

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[Eugenics](#)^[12] [Race improvement](#)^[13] [Communism](#)^[14] [Soviet Union](#)^[15] [Bulgakov, Mikhail, 1891-1940. Sobach'e serdtse. English](#)^[16] [Bulgakov, Mikhail, 1891-1940. Short stories. Selections. English](#)^[17] [Bulgakov, Mikhail, 1891-1940](#)^[18] [Censorship](#)^[19]

Topic

[Publications](#)^[20]

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- [1] <https://embryo.asu.edu/pages/heart-dog-1925-mikhail-bulgakov>
- [2] <https://embryo.asu.edu/keywords/eugenics>
- [3] <https://embryo.asu.edu/keywords/science-fiction>
- [4] <https://embryo.asu.edu/keywords/satire>
- [5] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=dog>
- [6] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=eugenics>
- [7] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=humans>
- [8] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=eugenics%20movement>
- [9] <https://embryo.asu.edu/search?text=pituitary%20gland>
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- [11] <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/mdh.2014.68>
- [12] <https://embryo.asu.edu/library-congress-subject-headings/eugenics-0>
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- [14] <https://embryo.asu.edu/library-congress-subject-headings/communism>
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