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The Artistic Reception of the Bible Legend about Cain and Abel in Modern Ukrainian Literature

ABSTRACT

The article investigates the reception of the biblical tale of Cain and Abel in the story by A. Zabuzhko *Kazka pro kalinovu sopilku* (*The tale of Cain's Flute*) and the poem by O. Irwanec, *Braty* (*Brothers*). The subject of the study were the forms and methods of interpreting traditional motifs and images.

The biblical legend, its folklore and literary interpretations were selected as the basis for the considerations (J.H. Byron, I. Franko). Following an anti-religious trend in the treatment of traditional images, the authors created a postmodern version of Cain—a murderer and victim at the same time. The material of the Cainic tale also served the writers to address the issue of the relationship between extraordinary personalities and the average ones, and the lesser value of the first in the eyes of God. The result of the study are conclusions about the nature of postmodern reinterpretation of literary tradition in the works of A. Zabuzhko and O. Irwanec.

KEYWORDS: Bible legend, postmodernism, reinterpretation, reception, traditional motives and images

STRESZCZENIE

Artystyczna recepcja biblijnej legendy o Kainie i Ablu we współczesnej literaturze ukraińskiej

Artykuł eksploruje recepcję biblijnej opowieści o Kainie i Ablu w opowiadaniu *Kazka pro kalinovu sopilku* (*Baśń o Kainowej fujarce*) O. Zabużko i dziele poetyckim *Braty* (*Bracia*) O. Irwanec. Przedmiotem studium stały się formy i sposoby interpretacji motywów i reprezentacji tradycyjnych. Jako podstawę rozważań wybrano folklorystyczne i literackie interpretacje opowieści biblijnej (J.H. Byron, I. Franko). Ich autorzy, wpisując się w antyreligijną tendencję przetwarzania obrazów tradycyjnych, stworzyli postmodernistyczną wersję Kaina – mordercy i ofiary zarazem. Materiał opowieści o Kainie posłużył pisarzom także jako możliwość odniesienia się do kwestii relacji pomiędzy osobowościami niezwykłymi a zwyczajnymi ludźmi oraz mniejszej wartości

tych pierwszych dla Boga. Wynikiem rozważań są wnioski na temat natury postmodernistycznej reinterpretacji tradycji literackiej w pracy O. Zabuzhko i O. Irvanec.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: powieść biblijna, postmodernizm, reinterpretacja, recepcja, obrazy i motywy tradycyjne

Artistic reception of the Biblical tale about fratricide has a long history in Ukrainian literature, but for most artists it was not the entire story that became a subject for interpretation, but the image of Cain as the first embodiment of the criminal-rebel on earth (Franko, *Smert' Kajina* [Cain's death], Kobyljanska, *Zemlja* [The earth], Janowskyj, *Wershnyky* [Riders], Zemljak, *Lebedyna zgraja* [Swan flock], Sosyur, *Kajin* [Cain], Rubchak, *Kajinovi* [Cain's tribe], etc.). The biblical story provided writers with space for raising important existential, moral, philosophical, and social problems. Perhaps this is why the problem of transformation of biblical scenes and images in literature today remains one of the most pressing issues, as evidenced by numerous studies (Hundorov, Ilnytskyj, Pavlichko, Sulima, Tyholoz, et al.). The main research interest was the adaptation of the Biblical canon texts of individual writers and deciphering the authors' interpretations of traditional motifs and images.

The aim of our study is to demonstrate that the reception of the Cain image in the artistic creativity of Zabuzhko and Irvanec is relevant in the context of the Cainic literary discourse while at the same time it is marked by originality. Considering the novel by Zabuzhko *Kazka pro kalinovu sopilku* (*The tale of Cain's Flute*) and the poem by Irvanec, *Braty* (*Brothers*), we shall define which elements of the biblical story were the subject of the reception and what was the purpose of their use.

The research on the current reception of the eternal images and stories are worth considering from the position of exercising a multidisciplinary approach that includes the views of modernist and postmodernist philosophies, elements of psychoanalysis, mythological, post-colonial and feminist criticism, on top of structuralism. This research is motivated by the eclecticism of the artistic practice. In our exploration we shall use the achievements of mythological criticism, literary-historical, typological and comparative psychoanalytic approaches.

Considering the novel by Zabuzhko, researchers traditionally emphasize its folk sources (Ageeva, Bashkirov, Goloborodko, Pavliuk), as the interpreted biblical foundation works somewhat superficially and seems detached from folklore. The poem by Irvanec remains unnoticed in literature studies who generally determines the relevance of our study.

The researcher Vardevanyan notes that the traditional elements, for a fundamental rethinking of the Cainic story in folklore and literature, are the circumstances, motivation, and the effects of fratricide. Already George Byron started the tradition of clarifying the ethical and philosophical categories in the material of the biblical legend of Cain and Abel. The anti-religious essence of his Cain manifested in the disagreement with the fact that God is the embodiment of goodness: “’Twas his will, And he is good.//How know I that? Because He is all—powerful, must all—good, too, follow?” (Byron, 2002)

The tale of Cain’s Flute by Zabuzhko classified the biblical fratricide story in the typology of the folk stories about the old man’s and old woman’s daughters. However, the writer’s interest is not in the Biblical story in general, but the fratricide motif (which is transformed under the influence of folk tradition in into a sororicide motif) and the folk interpretation of punishment for this sin associated with the lunar myth that was productive in the work of the Romantics:

Daddy, what is this dark spot on the Moon? ... That, Basil said, is the brother who stabbed the other brother with a fork. There were two brothers, Cain and Abel, and God placed them above the ground, for people to see, and to not forget that sin. (Zabuzhko, 2004, p. 79)

An original interpretation of the biblical legend by Zabuzhko is delivered through the prism of her character Annie. The little girl who first saw the spots on the moon and heard the legend of Cain and Abel could not understand why God punished both brothers (“if they are put there for punishment, why were they both punished equally?” (Zabuzhko, 2004, p. 79) and why was God so cruel and malicious: “how can God ever keep them there on the Moon, especially impaled on the fork ... Doesn’t that hurt him?” (Zabuzhko, 2004, p. 79). As an adult, she again turns to the biblical narrative, but now she is bothered by another question: “Why did the Lord accept Abel’s sacrifice, and not Cain’s?” (Zabuzhko, 2004, p. 110). And, thinking about it, Annie realizes that Cain did not “raise the fork against his brother for nothing” (Zabuzhko, 2004, p. 110) but in rebel against the injustice perpetrated by God. Apparently, the Cainic spirit of protest against God and “the highest injustice,” the ardent disobedience inherent in Annie, could have made it into Zabuzhko’s created character of Anna as the image of the Ukrainian Cain-woman. That this is not a copy of the traditional literary image but a self-standing image with a corresponding semantic content, is indicated by those postulates, against which the heroine rises, accusing God:

She shouted at the sky above covered with twisting clouds ... at Him who was sitting there, never allowing her to look at His face, and the echo of her mighty laughter sounded in the forest, like the noise of an invisible army: *And what do you know!* (Zabuzhko, 2004, p. 117)

The writer uses the biblical legend in her reconsideration of the folk story, its inlaying as a palimpsest, while the story of the sisters shows the author's interpretation of the well-known folk motif. The comparison of Zabuzhko to the proto-text and its folk interpretation occurs in the context of the central problems of the work: the struggle and the origins of love and hate, good and evil. Researchers usually correlated the image of Annie with the negative character of the old woman's daughter and the image of Lena with the positive one of the old man's daughter. However, the author's concept does not provide for such unambiguous characterization of the women. Anna

particularly wanted to break the limits dictated by birth, family laws to break away from women's fate, and became hostage to the myth of the happy marriage as the highest female achievement, the beautiful princess in a crystal unattainable tower, who is waiting for the liberator-prince to come. (Ahyeyeva, 2003, p. 296–297)

Anna takes an interest in the history of the biblical brothers when she herself begins to feel the injustice of society's attitude to her and to Lena. Anna predicts the murder of her sister at the beginning of the book: Lena tried to arouse her sister's anger by all she did:

in fact, the only thing Helen seeks is to see Annie's anger come out, only that, and nothing more, as though this anger was the goose, which Olenka was instructed to watch over ... so, Helen watched over the goose and the goose fed itself and grew until it became enormous. And was it beautiful. (Zabuzhko, 2004, p. 78)

The poetic work *Brothers* by Irvanec adds its own interpretation of the images of the Cain and Abel. In the poem, the biblical motive of the crime and punishment fades into the background, and in Cain's doubts are subject to interpretation. Cain does not dare to commit murder, but not thanks to the understanding of the despicability of such a deed, or fear the Lord's ire, but out of with reluctance to help create a halo of martyrdom around Abel.

This original reception ponders moral and ethical concepts of good. Cain is frightened by Abel's "goodness," "kindness," "silent love" and "humble grief." Cain recognizes the murder which he is intended to commit, as a "good deed" because will turn Abel into an innocent sacrifice: "I am

a good brother. // My name is Cain // But I have failed to kill” (Irvanec, 1991, p. 46). As one can see, the poet’s reception of the biblical legend fits into the anti-religious tradition in interpreting the image of Cain, but also presents its new version. The Cain of Irvanec is not actually against God, but against Christian morals, the virtues of which are humility and sacrifice. Abandoning the murder of Abel, Cain punishes him for his kindness and humility that he considers wicked because Abel refuses to defend himself, deliberately choosing becoming the sacrificial victim:

Sneakily innocent,
You shall fall upon the earth,
And the proper name Cain
Will be the one for all bringers of death.
And you, obedient and humble,
And yours shall be forever
The name of the hapless victim.
Brother Abel!
I shall not kill you.
Now, go (Irvanec, 1991, p. 46)

O. Irvanec rethinks not only the image of Cain, and through the prism of his mind, also the image of Abel. By changing the polarity of the traditional characters, the reader is presented with the “good brother Cain,” who failed to kill Abel with the evil “heavenly dream,” “that I [Kain] will kill you one day” (Irvanec, 1991, p. 46). With such a reconsideration, Irvanec places axiological accents on the binary opposition Cain-Abel, the corresponding Cainic positions that interpret Cain as the chosen one, the bearer of a higher power, and Abel as figure marked by weakness and forgettable.

Zabuzhko and Irvanec alike generally follow the trend of anti-religious interpreting of the image of Cain, by modernizing its reinterpretation of the literary tradition (started in world literature by George Byron, and in Ukrainian literature by Franko). In the opinion of Vardevanyan “modernist paradigm of Cain the criminal transforms Cain into a victim; post-modern mythology also creates an ambivalent mythologeme of a contradictory personality that is both the killer and victim” (Vardevanyan, 2008, p. 13). The Cain of Irvanec and Anna of Zabuzhko are striking examples of this postmodern concept: for both authors it is the most important not to justify crime, but to rehabilitate a murderer, understand them and forgive. But if Irvanec’s poem, rethinks ethical categories by a natural reversibility between the concepts of good, evil, the novel by Zabuzhko develops the idea that evil breeds evil only.

In the above interpretation of the Cainic plot also presents the problem of the relations between a an exceptional person and the average one,

while the latter seems preferred by God: “He favors only His wretched creatures, only the poor in spirit are dear to Him, while the best and strongest ... He persecutes and humiliates, and He rewards the small for fear that His reign be not taken from Him” (Zabuzhko, 2004, p. 116). As the Cain of Irvanec explains the fact of Abel being chosen by God due to his humility and gentleness, the devil of Zabuzhko explains it as his insignificance and poverty of spirit.

As one can see, the artistic reception of the biblical tale of Cain and Abel in the works of Zabuzhko and Irvanec has a very original character and deserves further attention in literature studies.

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