

Tetiana Pavlinchuk

<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-2182-9294>
Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University
tanya_pavlinchuk@ukr.net
DOI: 10.35765/pk.2020.2801.04

Emptiness Effect, or What Lost Symbols Say
(on the Basis of the Drama *Seven Steps to Golgotha*
by Oleg Goncharov)

ABSTRACT

Bible themes and story lines have always been of interest in Ukrainian literature. In recent decades, creative rethinking of biblical codes and symbols has taken place, especially in themes connected with questions of faith, truth, prophecy, sacrifice, kindness, malice, etc. The contemporary Ukrainian writer Oleh Goncharov gives coverage to this issue in his drama *Seven Steps to Golgotha*. This article deals with the problem of a biblical symbol, experiencing alienation, losing its own symbolic meaning, and creating emptiness. This emptiness, however, is only visible because a new meaning replaces it, gains another meaning, and becomes a new symbol. Phantasmagoria—the genre of the play chosen by its author—makes it possible to use various approaches and experiments, to organize the plot's chronology, to justifying the characters' actions, and arrange a story line, in particular.

KEYWORDS: phantasmagoria, biblical symbol, false prophecy, biblical and prophetic discourse, alienation of a biblical symbol

STRESZCZENIE

Efekt pustki, czyli o czym mówią ustracone symbole (według dramatu Olega Honczarowa *Siedem kroków do Golgoty*)

Tematy biblijne zawsze były aktualne w literaturze ukraińskiej. Obecnie trwa artystyczny namysł nad biblijnymi kodami i symbolami, zwłaszcza tematami związanymi z zagadnieniami wiary, prawdy, proroctwa, dobroczynności, dobra, zła. Współczesny pisarz ukraiński Oleg Honczarow podaje interpretacje wymienionych problemów w dramacie *Siedem kroków do Golgoty*. W artykule rozpatrywany jest fenomen utraty znaczenia przez symbol biblijny i powstanie pustki na jego miejscu. Ta pustka zaś wydaje się pozorna, ponieważ w tym miejscu pojawia się nowy sens, który staje się nowym symbolem. Autor traktuje swój utwór jako fantasmagorię, co pozwala mu na

Suggested citation: Pavlinchuk, T. (2020). Emptiness Effect, or What Lost Symbols Say (on the Basis of the Drama *Seven Steps to Golgotha* by Oleg Goncharov). *Perspektywy Kultury*, 28 (1), pp. 15–24.

Submitted: 01.01.2019

Accepted: 15.03.2020

użycie różnych eksperymentów i chwytów literackich, organizację czasu i przestrzeni, wyjaśnienie zachowania się bohaterów, opracowanie szczegółów fabuły.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: fantasmagoria, biblijny symbol, fałszywy prorok, biblijny prorocki dyskurs, alienacja symbolu biblijnego

The author of the play which is the subject of my analysis—Oleg Goncharov (Гончаров Олег Васильович)—is a writer, playwright, poet, and composer. He was born in 1953 in the Lviv region of Ukraine. He is the author of the novel *The Main Target of the Attack* as well as 19 dramas, over 100 humorous stories, poetry, and musical pieces.

Seven Steps to Golgotha 2 is the second version of the play. The first version was published in the collection *Strike of Illusion: An Anthology of Contemporary Ukrainian Drama* (Goncharov, 2004, p. 370). It has stirred up the interest of researchers, especially that of O. Bondareva (2008, pp. 259–275) and O. Kogut (2010, pp. 195–200) and has been thoroughly critiqued and studied from various angles: obvious biblical allusions, characteristics of the plot, the contemporary context of Ukrainian dramaturgy, the moral and ethical order, the archetypes found in the text, stylistic drawing according to the principles of Antoni Artaud’s “theater of cruelty” and Bertolt Brecht’s “epic theater,” etc.

To begin with, let me briefly outline the plot of the play in question. The events take place “somewhere in the desert.” The time of the story is also undetermined. The main character, Japheth, thinks of himself as the Messiah; he hews a cross for himself to climb Golgotha and gain the fame of the Messiah. On his way to Golgotha, he is accompanied by Devilar, the Owner of Time, who—ironically and accusingly—comments on the story of the self-proclaimed Messiah, but does not interfere in the course of events. Here, the Messiah is the antipode of the Christian savior, because his history is criminal, and in Devilar’s description, he is the embodiment of sin itself. While drunk, Japheth kills his wife and maid and, placing a cross on his back, goes to the city of Keilah. There, he begins to preach freedom and justice, persuades the people to revolt, appears in the castle of Joda—the king of Keilah—who would not mind playing the role of Pilate. Japheth stays in the castle, stirs up intrigues, gains the king’s trust, and after his foretold death in the pit with vipers, he becomes king of Keilah.

In the second act, the self-proclaimed Messiah makes full use of his royal power. The philosophical aphorisms, thanks to which he builds the illusion of a preacher, are now uttered less often, while acts of revenge crime and debauchery occur more frequently. The subjects of the late King Joda,

who become subordinate to the new king, hate him and scheme against him. Dissatisfied, miserable, and suspicious, Japheth-Messiah does not give up his dream of climbing Golgotha, and thus proving the omnipotence and fame of God, without the fact of crucifixion. Japheth-king forces his subjects to build Golgotha, which becomes a symbol of his crime.

During a phantasmagoric crucifixion, the souls killed by Japheth appear as a symbol of higher punishment. Japheth is crucified by his friends who served him out of fear rather than obedience. For Japheth, resurrection, which was prepared for the Messiah according to the biblical myth, becomes a punishment for his sins, because it lays the foundation for further crucifixions every five years, i.e., eternal dying.

Goncharov's play can be interpreted on three levels: the biblical symbols themselves, the loss of symbolic meaning, and the new meaning they attain.

The biblical symbols include the cross, the donkey, Golgotha, the crown of thorns, the number seven, names, and others.

The biblical symbols lose their original meaning (a blind donkey turns the well wheel; a wreath of thorns on which spikes are regularly cut so that it does not pierce the forehead when worn everyday; the main character hews the cross by himself, tries it on to check whether it is comfortable, and uses it as a bed; the unfulfilled miracle of the descent into the pit with vipers is a result of an error; named characters do not fulfill the roles assigned to them). Compared to the real torments of Christ, the need to have a comfortable cross seems absurd. Japheth makes it easy for him to wear. And if "the road is far" to Golgotha, then considering the repetitiveness of Japheth's death and resurrection, this is an eternal Golgotha.

The biblical symbols acquire a new meaning. Japheth has achieved his goal—to become a god on Earth and to experience unlimited power in human understanding within a short time. This is a primitive identification of God with only power, not with sacrifice; with selfishness, not with altruism. Devilar's banal (at first glance) idea that God exists as long as people believe in him becomes true for Japheth at the moment of his crucifixion and condemnation to eternal dying. The crucifixion is a sign of the return to the original meaning. Japheth is crucified as punishment for the crimes he has committed, so his crucifixion stands as the crucifixion of a false prophet. This artistic vision of the Gospel motif leaves the viewer to think about the roots of evil.

The biblical context is already manifest at the level of composition: the first act of the play consists of seven scenes, symbolizing the steps to Golgotha; in the second act, the symbolic "Golgotha" of Japheth, calling himself a god on earth, begins: his spiritual and physical torments foretell his infamous death. The hero's behavior and mood change radically: "My

wrists and feet are starting to hurt. I'm starting to think I have wounds on them"; "The back of my head burns like fire and I feel drowsy" (Goncharov, 2009). The seven deaths suffered at the hands of Japheth and the seven mortal sins are also symbolic.

Based on the biblical myth, used as a matrix, a literary myth is created, the purpose of which is to rethink the most important human truths, the possibility of a true prophet or a false prophet appearing. Although there are many different truths, certain truths are inviolable, especially the eternal understanding of good and evil, truth and untruth, and sin and punishment. The language and the play's ending confirm the causal link between the events and they form the context in which the drama can be interpreted as a return to Christian values, for example, to a just punishment for evil. Japheth's punishment—reliving his evil deeds every five years: killing his wife, arriving in Keilah, and being crucified—create an image of eternal death.

The author's artistic conception is to highlight the fact that the biblical symbol seemingly loses its sacred meaning. Even the first meeting of Devilar and Japheth produces the effect of denying God:

MESSIAH: (*surprised*) Do you know my real name?

DEVILAR: I know everything about everyone.

MESSIAH: (*insolently*) You are lying! A man can't know everything!
(*Smiling with a sneer*) Maybe you're God?

DEVILAR: Fortunately not. I did better in life. (Goncharov, 2009)

Devilar renounces the possibility of being God: in the drama he takes on a fantastical character, be it a higher judge, a higher adviser, a demon tempter, or a man who prognosticates all events and is able to anticipate the future punishment for crimes. His "sandals not covered in dust" and sarcastic comments on Japheth's life do not correspond to the traditional visual images of God. In his thoughts about "misery and disapproval of excellent figures," Jean Paul draws on the comments of the aesthetician Buterwek that "the greatest thief can, from an aesthetic point of view, sometimes be more charitable than the greatest virtue." He concludes from this statement that, aesthetically, "a demon is more attractive than god" (Asmut, 2014, p. 92). By introducing Devilar to the play, the playwright seems to "transfer" theatre direction "into the hands" of fate. Compared with the symbolism of the demonic Devilar as a representative of a higher authority—the Owner of Time—Japheth-Messiah becomes an even greater demon: the embodiment of sin itself.

With the distorted understanding of reality, the understanding of death also changes. The Gospel story of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection

presents an image of death as the most terrible event of human existence. The Passion of Christ—this is how the suffering of the crucified Son of God is defined; his suffering has no equal. Goncharov represents the degeneration of a human being in such a dimension that death is no longer a tragedy, but an ordinary affair, a path to illusory liberation:

Now everything.... If the past cannot be fixed, it must be eliminated.
I think I did the right thing killing them. Sooner or later someone would
kill them! Aren't there enough bloodthirsty bandits wandering the desert!
It's better to die from my axe (Goncharov, 2009)

Rationalizing your own actions justifies all crime and creates its own separate truth, which leads to almightiness.

The sarcastic mood of the play makes one doubt the possibility of the prophet's coming. Joda states that "in our day, the Messiah can neither appear nor be born at all! We are not going through the end of the world now" (Goncharov, 2009). The coming of a false prophet is occasioned by the statement that a true prophet cannot appear, and his fate becomes the sign of a prophecy: a punishment for sins.

The symbolism of names also makes up the biblical prophetic discourse used in the text. Japheth (this is the real name of the Messiah in the play) was one of Noah's sons and is one of the founders of humanity; Esau, nicknamed Edom, was Isaac's older brother; Raphael was one of the seven archangels. I would like to draw special attention to the name Joad. In *Saints' Lives*, gathered by Dmitry Rostovsky, we find a story about the prophet Joad, who came from Samaria and was summoned by God to reveal the worship of the idols of the Israeli king, Jeroboam. There, God forbade the prophet to eat bread, drink water, and travel back the same road he came. A prophet foretold Jeroboam's death from God, but on his return the king did not obey God's command and tasted the food which the false prophet Emwe offered to him. For this, the prophet Joad was killed by a lion, but his body was intact and he was buried near the home of the prophet who had tempted him (Rostovsky, 1906, p. 608). Goncharov's Joad dies in a pit with vipers in front of the eyes of a false prophet.

The discussion on the subject of true prophecy and false prophecy is not new in Ukrainian literature. For example, Volodymyr Vynnychenko referred to this theme in the play *Prophet*, whose first title was *Messiah* (1930). In this play, the death of the main character, the prophet Amar, is an illusion of the resurrection. In Vynnychenko's text, the clash of ideas, the struggle for the truth of this or that theory, revolves around the desire to be needed by society, to shape one's life according to one's beliefs and principles, the fulfillment of which guarantees happiness. Human sacrifice (the

prophet Amar's death), which is supposed to be a liberation and rescue, is the basis for the emergence of new beliefs against the backdrop of previous ones. We discern the thought that "all truth can be turned into a lie and a lie into the truth" (Vynnychenko, 2003, p. 269). Everything depends only on the inner calling and perseverance in following one's principles. The blurred boundary between truth and lie is justified by the illusion of the possibility of introducing general happiness. Characteristic of Vynnychenko, the tendency to emphasize the meaning carried by the concepts of morality–amorality, truth–lies, and good–evil centers on the idea of increasing the happiness of humanity. On the other hand, Goncharov draws attention to the lack of any positive idea and the need to do good to another. The idea of messiahship, pseudo-messiahship, and power is associated only with one's own benefit and focusing on one's own goods.

Vynnychenko searched for harmony: he was on the side of a society that was not spoiled by civilization, living in harmony with nature, with one's desires, thoughts, and actions, "in accordance with word and deed" (Pavlinchuk, 2010). Amar's offering of himself for preserving and spreading the theory is not self-denial; on the contrary, God who has ceased to be God and approximates man in experiencing his feelings, ascends to heaven, gaining recognition and fame. The problem of the development of his theory and its adequate (true) interpretation lies with his successors (Pavlinchuk, 2010, p. 157).

In his drama, Oleg Goncharov unveils the linguistic construction of the text. Devilar formulates a philosophical context: "I am time, and time belongs to both good and evil"; "You won't wash it from the inside [of your head]. Your thoughts are too dirty" (Goncharov, 2009). Japheth-Messiah formulates a series of new pseudo-commandments of the earthly God: "Dirty thoughts are born out of a dirty life"; "Wanting to embark on a difficult path leading to a noble goal, it is foolish to stuff your pockets with gold and burden your heart with friendship and goodness"; "A weight that is lightly carried becomes light"; "Criminals don't need a teacher. They need a hangman"; "When the truth is at work—mercy is out of place"; "A man with a purpose should have a hardy heart"; "If you want to be considered God, forget about fear"; "Earthly God should feel nothing but his own grandeur"; "If you have a good head on your shoulders, you will reach Golgotha at the expense of a people who believes in you!"; "My people will build Golgotha or die!"; "Revenge must be long-lived"; etc. (Goncharov, 2009).

The sacred quality of the word, its purpose, and its power are defined in the first verses of St. John's Gospel "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1). The word contains spiritual information and meaning and the divine code. Goncharov presents the consequences of using the word not for its original biblical purpose, but for evil: "I've always been fascinated by

people like you.... People who have achieved fame ... and who were able to use [it] in their favor at the right moment. The word, as well as one's own example, can even change the course of history" (Goncharov, 2009). Japheth-Messiah creates the illusion of prophecy.

The idea of an apostolate—which involves faith, obedience, and service—is also connected with the subject of prophecy and messianism. The appearance of Geriniy, an accidental student, builds up a picture of the relationship of the new Messiah and his disciple, based on a mutually beneficial agreement. While the New-Testament Christ included Matthew, a tax collector, among his apostles, we know Geriniy to be a robber who is still following the same path, which he believes to be a necessity:

MESSIAH: Can you read?

GERINIY: Of course, sometimes we robbed people who had books with them. As it turned out, reading books is a lot more enjoyable than robbing and murdering. However, reading books alone will not keep us alive. (Goncharov, 2009)

These words appeal to the conscience of anyone who explains or justifies their actions with a higher necessity—difficult living conditions or a collapse of spirituality in general. The desert where New-Testament Jesus preached and fed the crowd of people with two fish here becomes a test for humanity: the one who has strength has power.

GERINIY: And what, are you going to just kill me like a lamb?

MESSIAH: You just wanted to do the same to me a moment ago. What has changed suddenly in the universe?

GERINIY: The rules of the game have changed. Now you have a knife in your hand. (Goncharov, 2009)

Geriniy's mundane musings on good and evil become rationalized and correspond to primitive thinking and a utilitarian understanding of charity: "You can become a craftsman or bake bread. Only then you will have to start paying taxes. When I stop robbing, I'll give others the opportunity to rob me" (Goncharov, 2009). The problem here is as follows: the force used to fight evil is also evil. Not reacting to evil and being passive also serve evil. Such sophisms lead to a vicious circle of ideas and understanding of reality.

Goncharov equips his characters with the ability to understand primitive human instincts and to use this knowledge to their advantage. Accepting Jesus's teachings did not earn fame, respect, and wealth on earth; it did not entail success, but persecution. In contrast, the Messiah and Herynij assume that their messianism will be a complete success:

GERINIY: Take me with you.

MESSIAH: Why do I need you?

GERINIY: In squares full of people I could wash your tired legs. Slaves like to see the suffering of free citizens. (Goncharov, 2009)

The characters in this play are divided so that everyone expresses thoughts on good and evil, but at the beginning of the play those characters that stand on the opposite side of the main character leave the stage: Cassinia (Pure Soul), Rovena, and Hannah. The benevolent motives are veiled by sinister ones, which gives the impression of an absolute triumph of evil. Within the long dialogues, there are discussions in which everyone tries to expose their own truth or rationally justify the victory of evil:

RAPHAEL: The death of a treasurer always gives rise to rumors. The more reliable the treasurer was, the more ignominious the rumors are. It always has been and always will be so. There is no place for an honest soul in this world. In our world, an honest man is a gladiator who should fight with his own hands against lions released to hound him. (Goncharov, 2009)

It can be seen in the play that supporters of the royal court and evildoers do not recognize their own guilt in eradicating faith in the existence of good. Cassinia the Pure Soul, Rovena, and Hannah, however, come back to that world at the time of the crucifixion of Japheth-Messiah.

You can also see here the symbolic problem of humans' responsibility for their fate: "Messiah is not a name," the Owner of Time warns Japheth. "Messiah is a fate" (Goncharov, 2009). We witness the misunderstanding of fate determined by the name when Japheth travels up Golgotha in the company of the thief Isavrikos. Japheth does not want to share the fame that will befall him as the only God; he cannot imagine it happening otherwise:

ISAVRIKOS: I will go with you.... I will even help you carry the cross!

MESSIAH: (*angrily*) What?!! Can you help? You want to help me carry the cross?! But this is my cross. (Goncharov, 2009)

According to the biblical myth, Jesus was crucified alongside two criminals. In Goncharov's play, Isavrikos pulls nails from under his belt and, along with the other highwayman, Herynij, completes the crucifixion. The earthly God, the embodiment of sin itself, is condemned to eternal dying, and becomes the God of death.

The author describes his drama as a phantasmagoria, which allows him to use a variety of literary devices and experiments, especially when it comes to the organization of space-time. The framework—the same

beginning and ending of the play (Messiah hews the cross, kills his wife, then sets off in search of his own Golgotha) anticipates the repetition of the plot and logically evokes the questions of when the audience meets the main character for the first time and whether this situation is taking place for the first, second, or maybe hundredth time. The main character in the play wakes up from his slumber, which suggests a conventionality to what is happening. The setting is also not specified, only “somewhere in the desert.” A reality is conjured up before the reader that relates to eternal themes and plots.

The phantasmagoric context is also maintained by the combination of polycultural traditional elements of mythology: ancient (the constant climbing up the Golgotha [a mountain] with the cross [the stone of Sisyphus]); medieval European (an astrologer who brews a potion of immortality for the king); and fantastical (Devilar, the Owner of Time, and his role—be it a sage, a demon, or a tempter). This confirms the existence of eternal truths that possess meaning beyond any named or proclaimed space, beyond any proclaimed earthly God, and are inimitable.

The plot is a series of events that are perceived as an arbitrary convention and used not in order to characterize the self-proclaimed Messiah, but to visualize the sin/crime itself. Naturalistic images of killing, cynical statements, worldviews which are not based on any principles, and mental pathologies are the embodiment of evil.

The postmodern era announced the destruction and secularization of the most important human values, leaving humankind lost. After realizing this fact, we can suppose that there will be a return of lost values, and a recognition of their existence also separately from the traditional understanding of God. In this context, Kuart’s utterance, which he tried to prove to Japheth, also plays an important role: “God is higher than human sins” (Goncharov, 2009).

The plot of the “reverse Gospel” (Bondareva, 2008), the secularized display of Christian values and the distorted elucidation of Christian truths, is not an end in itself or a bold repudiation of universal truths characteristic of postmodern literature—this lost meaning of Christian symbolism receives a new, literal sense, not an allegorical incarnation. The void that appears in place of the lost symbol returns to its sources and receives its original meaning, thus forming a new symbol with a new meaning.

Seven Steps to Golgotha, the philosophical drama by Oleg Goncharov, raises the problem of human existence, essence, and destiny. When the characters realize the finality of human life and experience the fear of death, it conjures up thoughts about the illusions of immortality. Power and fame cease to matter, there are no magical recipes for eternal life, the fear of death by violence and murder evaporates. Human life, which does

not matter in the perspective of primitive understanding of values, however, gains the highest value by punishing criminals.

The uncertain boundary between life and death manifests itself in the original artistic interpretation of the concept of “eternal life,” according to which the infinite experience of the same period of one’s life becomes a symbol of death, while the return of the dead, “pure” characters—Casinia, Rovenia, and Hannah, who were removed from life at the beginning of the play—denies death as the final end and manifests the idea of the resurrection. Paradoxically, life and death, which are in a mutual relationship and seem not to differ from each other anymore, gain meaning in the face of the idea of a full-fledged life of a human being, where the arbitrarily set final boundary opens the possibility of continuing existence in human memory, in the duration of beliefs and theories.

REFERENCES

- Asmut, B. (2014). *Vstup do analizu dramy*. Zhytomyr: Vyd-vo ZhDU im. I. Franka.
- Bibliya, abo Knyhy Svyatoho Pys'ma Staroho j Novoho Zapovitu*. (1990). Ob'yednannya biblijnyx tovarystv.
- Bondareva, O.J. (2008). Zhanrovyj kod perevernutoho Jevanheliya u p'jesi Oleha Honcharova «Sim krokiv na Holhofu». In *Rusškaja literatura. Issledovanija*. Kiev.
- Honcharov, O. (2004). Sim krokiv do Holhofy. In Nadiya Miroschnyenko (Ed.), *Strajk iljuzij: antolohija suchasnoj ukrajins'koj dramaturhiji*. Kyiv: Osnovy.
- Honcharov, O. (18 May 2016). *Sem' shagov do Golgofy*. Retrieved from: http://samlib.ru/g/goncharov_o_w/sem_shagov.shtml
- Kohut, O.V. (2010). Biblijni szuzhety ta arkhetypy v suchasnij ukrayins'kij dramaturhiji. *Visnyk Zhytomyrs'koho derzhavnogo universytetu imeni Ivana Franka. Filolohichni nauky*. Iss. 54.
- Pavlinchuk, T.I. (2010). *Khudozhnia interpretacija evdemonizmu u tvorchosti Volodymyra Vynnychenka* (Doctoral Candidate dissertation). 10.01.01. Zhytomyr.
- Vynnychenko, V. (2003). Prorok. In *Ukrayins'ke slovo* (Vol. 1). Kyiv: Akonit.
- Zhitija svjatykh, na russkom jazyki zlozhennye po rukovodstvu Chetih-minejsv Dimitrija Rostovskago. Kniga sed'maja*. (1906). Moskva: Sinodal'naja Tipografija.

Tetiana Pavlinchuk—Doctor of literary studies, employee of the Zhytomyr Ivan Franko State University, responsible editor of the university’s scholarly journal, *Ukrainian Polish Studies*, and author of 20 scientific articles. Her research interests include comparative studies of Polish and Ukrainian literature, translation theory and practice, and the history and theory of drama.