

Nailia Khajrulina

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-3983-3627>

Taras Shevchenko National University of Luhansk

nailiakhairulina@gmail.com

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Judas Iscariot's Semiotic Image in Ukrainian Literature at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century (the Element of Treason)

ABSTRACT

The article under consideration is devoted to the semiotic analyses of the biblical apostle Judas Iscariot, one of the most contradictory religious characters. The article demonstrates the semiotic paradigm of Judas, including portrait semiotics (paleness, timidity, secrecy and slouch), gesture semiotics (abrupt movements) and symbolic semiotics (hopelessness, suicide). The research stresses the aspect of venality. It is proved that Judas Iscariot became the archetype of venality not only in literature, but in art generally. The article's summary will be used for students learning literary criticism and philologists.

KEYWORDS: semiotics, archetype, portrait semiotics, symbolism

STRESZCZENIE

Semiotyka przedstawień Judasza Iskarioty w literaturze ukraińskiej początku XX wieku (aspekt zdrady)

Artykuł poświęcono semiotycznej analizie biblijnej postaci Judasza Iskarioty. Biorąc pod uwagę wieloaspektowość jego przedstawienia religijnego, postać Judasza w kulturze stanowi przedmiot współczesnych badań. Artykuł ukazuje paradygmat semiotyczny obrazu Judasza, na który składa się semiotyka portretu (blada cera, zawstyżenie, skrytość), semiotyka gestu (gwałtowne ruchy) oraz semiotyka symbolu (beznadzieja, rozpacz). Nacisk położono na elementy zdrady i sprzedajności człowieka. Udowodniono, że Judasz Iskariota reprezentuje archetyp zdrajcy.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: semiotyka, archetyp, semiotyka portretu, symbolizm

Modern literary science is characterized not only by the diversity of viewpoints, but also by alternative approaches to the analysis of literary text. The study of literary works related to their semiotic aspects of research has become quite popular in recent decades. This is due to the fact that the process of *semiosis* (sign-making) in literature is inevitable.

We can roughly distinguish between two permanent sources of such codes. First, literature is a mirror that reflects the sign systems operating in other areas of culture: mythology, religion, politics, science and everyday communication (body language, symbolism of flowers, etc.). Secondly, the signs are elements of artistic and poetic “language,” the updating of which does not mean ignoring the system of the previous codes.

Biblical meanings were extremely important for the development of Ukrainian culture. Many Ukrainian writers widely used the Bible as a proto-text in their work. Therefore, the semiotic analysis of biblical motifs and characters in the works of culture positions itself as a promising methodology.

Judas Iscariot—a religious image in literature—was an Apostle characterized as opposed to holiness with the following features: betrayal, envy, greed. Many literary critics sought to interpret this complex psychological and philosophical image in a special way. As the most important studies one might mention: *Iuda Iskariots'kyj v ukrajyns'kij literaturi XX st.* and *Svoyeridnist' transformaciyi yevanhel's'koho syuzhetno-obraznoho materialu v ukrajyns'kij literaturi XX stolittya* by V. Antofijchuk, *Tradyciya motyviv ta obraziv svitovoyi literatury u tvorchosti Ol'hy Kobyljans'koj* by S. Kyrylyuk, *Motyv zrady u literaturi pochatku XX stolittya* by O. Podlisetska and others.

From the point of view of the semiotics of Judas Iscariot, he is the archetype of sin, betrayal, greed and corruption in human literature. The proposed study will consider the image of Judas Iscariot in the light of corruption of the human soul for wealth or some profit. Based on this, the purpose of this article shall be the semiotic analysis of the image of Judas Iscariot in the works of Ukrainian literature of the early twentieth century with emphasis on the aspect of treason.

The whole complexity of the image semiotics of Judas, in my opinion, is realized in the works by two prominent Ukrainian writers—Lesia Ukrainka's drama, *Na poli krovu* [*In the field of blood*] (1909), and Olga Kobyljanska's story *Juda* [*Judas*] (1917).

In the process of interpreting these works we shall create a semiotic paradigm for the image of Judas, including the semiotics of portrait, the semiotics of gestures and the semiotic of symbolism.

Lesia Ukrainka's drama *in the field of blood* is a striking example of how the most famous “international” plot can acquire a new original meaning. The title field of blood is a field where already a few days after

the crucifixion of Jesus is cultivated zealously by its rightful owner, Judas Iscariot. His brief meeting and conversation with the occasional traveler, an old pilgrim provides the whole frame for the short (only 22 pages) drama.

In the storyline, Judas Iscariot purchased a plot of land on the clay and saline soils near Jerusalem for the thirty pieces of silver he received for betraying Christ and he is working hard tilling the ground. However, his measured pace of life is interrupted by the old pilgrim, who is thirsty. The conversation between Judas and pilgrim reveals the deep psychological essence of Judas' betrayal and his philosophy of corruption. At the beginning of the play, Judas appears to the reader as a pale, shy (he did not even raise his eyes to look at the pilgrim) and thoughtful man. That is the portrait of the hero-traitor that is presented to us. At the climax of the dramatic work, Judas' abrupt gestures and raised voice reveal his unbalanced nature:

Judas (with desperate boldness changes his hitherto sad, secretive manner, to loud and open arrogance):

And even if so?!

You think I'm afraid of this word?

'Sold! Betrayed!' Does one who betrays for nothing, do better?"

(Lesia Ukrainka, 2015, p. 5)

The following dialog reveals the philosophy of Judas' corruption. Having sold himself out for thirty pieces of silver, Judas the traitor is not aware that he had sold his soul, and now he does not belong to himself anymore:

PILGRIM:

This is not about sellable goods.

JUDAS:

What are sellable goods? Whatever that is unnecessary, may be sold. So, I had a teacher—when he became redundant, I sold him.

(Lesia Ukrainka, 2015, p. 7)

The finale of the drama remains deep philosophical—the pilgrim goes on, and Judas, aware of his despair, sadly continues tilling the land:

Judas stands for a minute, squeezing his head with his hands, then knocking his fists on his head, grabs the hoe and, without stretching his back or wiping the sweat, continues to work, senselessly. (Lesia Ukrainka, 2015, p. 10)

The artistic heritage of O. Kobylianska has a particular structure that is filled with symbolic images, signs and codes. Her story *Judas* presents the reader with an elderly farmer whose life was disrupted by the First World War.

The farmer takes care of the cattle of his son, who went to war. When a troop of Russian soldiers interrogates the farmer to say in what direction Ukrainian soldiers have gone, he refuses, but after beating, he randomly shows where he saw several soldiers. Ironically, he directed the Russian soldiers straight onto Austrian soldiers, among whom his son was: "He unintentionally became the killer of four souls" (Kobylianska, 1983, p. 319). Not knowing this, the farmer finds justification in the fact that he gave the money given to him by the Russian soldiers as a reward to the priest. But as the farmer decides to bury the dead, it seems as if some force is forcing him to look at the face of one of the four soldiers shot and "his gaze falls on his own son," "his own, only child, dead" (Kobylianska, 1983, p. 320). Thus, the father refers to himself as Judas, who, as a victim of circumstances, killed his own son. He commits suicide hanging himself by the neck. But, unlike the act of Judas, the farmer's act is did not known to anybody: "The forest, the single trees on the edge—and away from this place there, deep in the valley, a lonely peasant cottage" (Kobylianska, 1983, p. 322).

The transformation of the image of Judas demonstrates the depth of the author's psychological insight into the most infamous traitor in the history of mankind.

A researcher of the works of O. Kobylianska, J. Klym'yuk, compares the *Judas* novel with the with dramatic work of Lesia Ukrainka, *In the field of blood*, considering that both works

unite in myth and parable, firstly, generalized images of the main characters who, though different in the semantic meaning of the Gospel image of Judas, are basically archetypal, that is, reduced to a psychological specimen of a traitor. Secondly, due to the parabolic comparison of two remotely interconnected eras (early twentieth century and the biblical history), the images and events become allegorical works, i.e. signs of parable and mythological conditionality. Thirdly, the evangelical semblance used in the works allows the authors to expand the boundaries of artistic generalization and move ordinary cases of life to the level of the eternal problems of human existence. (Klym'yuk, 1988)

The semiotics of the image of Judas in the works of Olga Kobylianska and Lesia Ukrainka disclose a coded algorithm: portrait semiotics—gesture semiotics (behavior)—character semiotics—awareness of the betrayal (suicide, hopelessness).

Thus, the ontological conclusion is what binds both pieces together: the traitor's life becomes impossible when the victim of their act of betrayal is a loved one (child, respected teacher). These works, which, in my opinion, are some of the most important interpretations of the image of the biblical character, clearly underscore the depth of the axiological determination and psychological motivation of the authors referring to the biblical image of Judas Iscariot.

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Nailia Khajrulina—Graduate from the Taras Shevchenko National University of Luhansk. Post-graduate student. The author of 10 scientific publications. Research interests: comparative literature studies, literary semiotics and poetics.

