



**IMAGES OF GOOD AND EVIL: BIBLICAL MOTIFS IN LITERARY
WORKS (CHINGIZ AITMATOV "THE PLACE OF THE SKULL", MIKHAIL
BULGAKOV "THE MASTER AND MARGARITA", JOHN STEINBECK "EAST OF
EDEN"**

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Abstract

This study analyzes the images of good and evil based on biblical motifs in the literary works of Ch. Aitmatov "The Place of the Skull", M. Bulgakov "The Master and Margarita", and Jh. Steinbeck "East of Eden". The research uses intertextual and comparative methods to identify and interpret biblical motifs, highlighting similarities and differences in how these authors understand the eternal struggle between good and evil. The study also examines how these biblical motifs connect to modern problems, showing that good and evil have always been a fundamental part of human life and remain relevant today. The results of this research demonstrate the deep knowledge that Aitmatov, Bulgakov, and Steinbeck had of biblical texts and shows how they used them- whether explicit or hidden, partial or complete- in their works to reinterpret and reflect on human nature through the struggle between good and evil. This cross-cultural analysis contributes to the broader conversation about shared human values and the role of literature in preserving spiritual and ethical foundations.

Key words

biblical motifs, Good and Evil, Chingiz Aitmatov, Mikhail Bulgakov, John Steinbeck, "The place of the skull" , "The Master and Margarita", "East of Eden", Bible, literary analysis, human nature.

Good and evil have been an integral part of human life since its existence. What is good? What is evil? What is more in the world – good and evil? Everyone tries to answer these questions at least once in their life. Good and evil are moral concepts that characterize the spiritual side of a person and his activities.

One of the most important sources of inspiration for writers in creating their masterpieces and exploring the eternal theme of the struggle between good and evil



is the Bible. This ancient book contains a vast number of biblical motifs, plots, and images that continue to live on in the works of many authors around the world.

According to the concept of intertextuality (J. Kristeva), all texts are interdependent, and no text exists in isolation, as each one contains references to other sources [5]. Thus, the biblical motifs found in the works of various authors refer the reader back to the Bible, thereby forming a "dialogue" directly with the work itself, and through it with the characters, images of the Holy book.

A motif is a stable element in literature that carries a certain meaning or idea. The main feature of the motif is its recurrence in the literary tradition. According to B.Gasparov, "... any phenomenon, any semantic "spot" can function as a motif in a work - an event, a character trait, an element of the landscape, any object, a spoken word, paint, sound, etc" [4, pp.331-345].

This article explores biblical motifs in the novels of Aitmatov, Bulgakov, and Steinbeck using intertextual analysis of each work, comparative analysis of the three novels, and the semiotic method (symbols and allusions). The use of these methods helps identify common patterns and unique interpretations of biblical motifs in each novel in order to reveal the images of good and evil.

Ch. Aitmatov's "The Place of the Skull" is a deeply philosophical novel that weaves biblical motifs into a reflection on the moral and spiritual crisis of modern humanity. He showed the destructive effects of technological progress and spiritual emptiness, examining the motif of moral responsibility, warning that the human thirst for domination may lead the world to a symbolic "scaffold."

One of the central biblical themes in the novel is the reinterpretation of Jesus Christ, whose image is humanized by Aitmatov. This Christ expresses doubt and fear, saying to his punisher Pontius Pilate: "... *kind ruler, let me go! ... I'll pass through all lands with the word of God*" [1, p.131]. Here is a sharp contrast to the traditional Gospel figure. Through this, Aitmatov presents faith as something deeply human and close to ordinary suffering.

Another character Avdiy Kallistratov embodies the motif of new thought. Rejected by the Church, he insists on the need for a new understanding of God in the modern world. Like Christ, he sacrifices his life in the name of truth, choosing the difficult path of rebellion and inner conviction.

The motif of crucifixion is literalized in Avdiy's death, which parallels Christ's execution. Aitmatov powerfully ties ancient suffering to modern injustice. Figures like Grishan and Ober-Kandalov represent modern-day Pilates – weak, cynical, and complicit in evil.

Boston Urkuncheyev's storyline adds the motif of loss and justice. A modest shepherd who values honesty and tradition, he faces personal tragedy when his son dies. Reflecting on his collapse, he realizes: "... *up until now, he had been an entire*



world, whole and complete within himself, a world whose story was now played out to the very end" [1, p.309] Boston becomes another victim of a world where goodness is trampled by systemic violence.

The motif of apocalypse runs throughout the novel, portraying a society where spiritual emptiness reigns. Despite this, moments of beauty, like sacred music, suggest that hope can survive: "*Some cosmic consciousness perhaps from another galaxy will hear our playing and singing amidst the silence...*" [1, p.57].

Mikhail Bulgakov's "*The Master and Margarita*" offers a complex and layered interpretation of good and evil, drawing heavily on biblical motifs such as judgment, forgiveness, temptation, etc. Bulgakov explores these themes in both literal and symbolic ways. Woland, the embodiment of Satan, and his retinue play a dual role as tempters and punishers. He exposes human vices not out of malice, but as a way to restore moral balance. His retinue: Koroviev, Behemoth, Azazello, and Hella—also take on biblical and folkloric roles, acting as both seducers and executors of justice. "*There is also one which holds that it will be given to each according to his faith*" [2, p.285] — this line spoken by Woland encapsulates the novel's view of divine justice as an individualized, moral reckoning (motifs of judgment and temptation).

Parallel to this, the storyline of Yeshua Ha-Nozri and Pontius Pilate reinterprets the passion narrative. Yeshua is not divine but human, embodying kindness and nonviolence. His suffering (motif of suffering) becomes symbolic of truth in a corrupt world, and his forgiveness (Christian motif of forgiveness) extends even to his executioners: "*There are no evil people in the world*" [2, p.43]. Pilate, on the other hand, is torn between fear and conscience, ultimately betraying Yeshua to save himself, illustrating the motifs of betrayal, and cowardice.

The Master and Margarita's love story introduces the redemptive power of love and art. Even in the darkest situations, goodness shines through: "*Manuscripts don't burn*" [2, p.298]. The Master, a writer crushed by censorship, and Margarita, who sacrifices her soul to save him, represent the struggle of creativity and personal truth against oppression. Margarita's self-sacrifice echoes the biblical motif of devoted love. Bulgakov in his novel blurs the line between good and evil. Darkness, typically linked with sin, becomes a time for justice; light, usually a symbol of purity, accompanies betrayal and death. Bulgakov's philosophical question remains open: "*What would your good do if evil did not exist?*" [2, p.368].

John Steinbeck's "*East of Eden*" is a novel about the eternal human struggle between good and evil, centered on two families in Salinas Valley in California: Trasks and the Hamiltons. At the heart of the novel is a retelling of the biblical story of Cain and Abel, reimagined through two generations of Trask brothers—first Charles and Adam, then Cal and Aron. "...this old and terrible story is important



because it is a chart of the soul – the secret, rejected, guilty soul" [6, p. 207]. Steinbeck describes two generations of brothers with an allegorical reference: Cain and Abel – Charles and Adam, Caleb and Aaron. The author explores themes of free will, sin, sibling rivalry, and father-son relationships, giving the biblical narrative a modern resonance. The relationship between Adam and Charles reflects the biblical motif of sibling rivalry. Like Cain, Charles feels deep jealousy toward Adam, who is clearly favored by their father, Cyrus Trask. The motif of the father's blessing plays a key role in this hostility. If in Genesis Cain kills Abel because God accepts Abel's offering over his own, in the novel, this role is taken on by their father.

The story comes full circle with Cal and Aron. Cal, feeling unloved and burdened with his mother's dark legacy, wrestles with the same pain Cain faced - rejection. He tries to win his father's love with money but is refused. In anger, he reveals a devastating truth to Aron, who escapes into war and dies. *"He couldn't stand to know about his mother... So he tore up the world"* [6, p.444]. Cal's journey becomes a path toward forgiveness and redemption.

Steinbeck places love and its absence at the center of moral development (motif of love). Characters like Cal and Charles suffer not because they are inherently bad, but because they aren't loved the way they need to be. *"From his first memory Cal had craved warmth and affection, just as everyone does"* [6, p.339]. This makes love a force of salvation – or destruction, when missing.

Characters like Samuel Hamilton and Lee stand as spiritual guides (motif of prophecy). Lee's study of the Hebrew word *timshel* reveals Steinbeck's core belief in choice: In the end, Cal receives his father's forgiveness. The word "Timshel" becomes a blessing and a burden: *"It gave him the right to be a man"* [6, p.402].

Based on a comparative analysis of the works of Ch. Aitmatov's "The place of the Skull", M. Bulgakov's "The Master and Margarita" and Jh. Steinbeck's "East of Eden" can be identified most important similarity that unites these novels. What all three authors have in common is a deep understanding of the eternal theme of good and evil. The writers base their works on the idea that good and evil are not separate categories but coexisting forces that engage in an eternal confrontation – within a person, between people, and in the structure of the world as a whole. *«Kindly consider the question: what would your good do if evil did not exist, and what would the earth look like if shadows disappeared from it?»* [2, p.368].

Another unifying element in all the works is the use of biblical motifs to reveal the theme of good and evil. Aitmatov and Bulgakov turn to the figure of Christ (the conversation between Christ and Pontius Pilate), Steinbeck – to the Old Testament parable of Cain and Abel. Through biblical motifs, the writers show that good and evil have existed since the time of mankind, and do not disappear with the



development of culture and civilization. They remain the same forces through which the human essence is revealed.

Based on the analysis, it should be noted that some biblical motifs are reflected in the works of the three authors. Among them, the motif of wisdom through nature is present in the image of Akbara (Aitmatov), in the character of Woland (Bulgakov), and in the characters of Lee and Sam Hamilton (Steinbeck). The motif of spiritual search is common to Avdiy Kallistratov in "The place of the Skull", for the Master in "The Master and Margarita", and for the Chinese Lee in "East of Eden". Through the motif of the search for truth, Bulgakov and Steinbeck emphasize the idea that a creative person is always alone, all great minds are alone (The Master, Sam Hamilton, Chinese Lee). Thus, these authors highlight creativity and art as a great good peculiar only to man.

The power of maternal love, described by Aitmatov through the character of the she-wolf Akbara and by Steinbeck through the character of Lee's mother, plays a crucial role. This is one of the most powerful feelings in the Bible (the image of the Virgin Mary, the archetype of the mother). «...strong woman may be stronger than a man, particularly if she happens to have love in her heart. I guess a loving woman is almost indestructible" [6, p.274]. However, as in the case of Akbara, if her offspring are destroyed, this force transforms into vengeance and despair.

There is a consonance in the description of human evil in the form of a "new religion" that has emerged in the modern world. Aitmatov emphasizes that "a powerful new religion is on the way – the religion of overwhelming military force", which will destroy everything in its path. For Steinbeck, the "mass production method" will be such a destructive force: «In our time mass or collective production has entered our economics, our politics, and even our religion, so that some nations have substituted the idea collective for the idea God. This in my time is the danger» [6, p.101].

The motif of redemption and hope is depicted in all three novels. So, In Aitmatov's work, even though it may seem small, there is hope that good will triumph. The symbols of hope are Jesus, Avdiy and Boston Urkunchiev. As long as such people exist on earth, there is still hope for salvation. In "The Master and Margarita", the hope for the existence of good, and its eventual victory, is paradoxically shown through the figure of the dark spirit, Woland, and his retinue. Thanks to the dark force in Bulgakov's novel, a balance between good and evil is created. In Steinbeck's novel, the motif of hope is shown in the characters of Sam Hamilton, Lee and vividly through the image of Cal, who, having received his father's blessing, can now make a choice between good and evil.

The most powerful and life-affirming message of all three novels is that evil is destructive, and good is salvation. Any manifestation of evil, whether it's cowardice, betrayal, envy, always has negative consequences. In novels, the



characters face a moral choice. Choosing and bringing good into the world, in their opinion, requires a lot of effort, sometimes even sacrifice. Evil can only be defeated through conscious choice, not violence. It is man, being a rational being, who must be responsible for his actions, and it is on his ability to distinguish between good and evil in favor of the former that the general well-being of the world depends. Here it is impossible not to mention

Referring to well-known universal plots from the canonical Bible, Aitmatov, Bulgakov and Steinbeck each reinterpret biblical images in their own way to show the struggle between good and evil. This is not just the use of religious texts, but their reinterpretation and adaptation to the cultural and historical context of the time when the novels were written.

In "The place of the skull" of Ch. Aitmatov, the biblical motifs skillfully woven into the plot of the novel, are used by the author to reveal the global conflict between good and evil. This confrontation is shown not only in the relations between people (drug addiction, wars), but also between humanity and nature, giving a story large-scale character. The novel vividly reveals the theme of the apocalypse, which is associated with the degradation of society and the destruction of nature. The she-wolf Akbara, embodying natural wisdom and maternal love, has become a symbol of the loss of harmony between man and nature, and her death is a warning to humanity about the consequences of its evil and greedy actions.

In "The Master and Margarita", the biblical motifs serve as a tool by which Bulgakov shows the ambiguity of the nature of good and evil and the blurring of the boundaries between them. The main character Woland, represented by the devil, the "spirit of darkness," is not an absolute evil. Together with his retinue, he acts as the tempter and punisher of the people of Moscow in the 1930s for their vices. Woland's role is to maintain a balance between good and evil.

Bulgakov shows that the nature of good and evil is dual. Good is not always strong, absolutely, like evil, which sometimes leads to good results through its actions. In this duality of forces, through biblical motifs, the author reveals important themes: faith and disbelief, freedom, the artist's place in the world, the nature of power, redemption, and forgiveness. The main paradox of "The Master and Margarita" is as follows: to see and do good, the devil is needed.

In "East of Eden", the main reference to the Bible is the parable of Cain and Abel, which is reinterpreted by the author and transferred to two generations of the Trask family. The story of the Trask and Hamilton families is a story about good and evil, about love and hate, about beauty and ugliness, about strength and weakness. Through the relationships between the brothers Charles and Adam, then Caleb and Aaron Trasks, Steinbeck reveals the motifs of fratricide, jealousy, childhood neglect, repentance, and forgiveness.



According to Steinbeck, From birth, both good and evil live in a person. The lack of love and recognition from fathers, shown by the author in the images of Charles and Cal, that cultivate such vices as envy and revenge in a person, pushing him to do bad things. However, through the words of the wise character Lee, the author emphasizes that man is not doomed to evil. The support and forgiveness of loved ones give him a chance to take the side of goodness. So, the concept of timshel – “you can” – gives a person the freedom to choose between good and evil. In the constant internal struggle between good and evil, the great blessing for a person lies in the ability to make a choice, which is what makes them great.

Thus, by masterfully using and intertwining biblical motifs into their novels, Aitmatov, Bulgakov and Steinbeck reveal the eternal theme of the confrontation between good and evil in different ways. For Aitmatov, good interpreted through the biblical story of Christ, is connected with self-sacrifice and the hope for spiritual rebirth. In “*The Master and Margarita*”, Bulgakov, using Christian motifs, demonstrates the powerlessness of good in the face of systems and authority, but its ultimate victory through love and creativity. Steinbeck, on the other hand, elevates the idea of free will, emphasizing that every person determines his own destiny.

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