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# The Multifaceted Judas-An Analysis of the Image of Judas in Judas Iscariot

Yu Wang<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai, China

\* Correspondence: Yu Wang, Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai, China



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**Abstract:** Judas Iscariot uses the biblical story of Jesus's preaching and passion as a framework, focusing on shaping the complex image of Judas—a figure who desires to connect with goodness yet commits unrighteous acts. Through a close reading of the text of Judas Iscariot, this paper attempts to present a clear and rich portrayal of the image of Judas in the novel, revealing the author's personal exploration and reflection on the spiritual dilemmas caused by the misfortunes of Russia in the early 20th century, as well as those inherent to humanity itself.

**Keywords:** image of Judas; Judas Iscariot; Russian Silver Age

## 1. Introduction

The literature and culture of the transforming "Silver Age" frequently explored the Gospels. The selection of these historical and mythical themes often served to strengthen observations of reality. The subjective recreation of this story by different writers reflected the hesitation and tension of intellectuals amidst differing ideologies of the time. In Fyodor Sologub's short story *The Betrothed of Judas*, Judas and his fiancée are completely sunken in the desire for money; the return of the thirty silver pieces is merely a rumor, and the ill-gotten gains from betraying Jesus win Judas the heart of his fiancée. Dmitry Merezhkovsky expressed unique views on Christianity in his *Christ and Antichrist* trilogy; his other work, *Jesus the Unknown*, directly used the Gospels as a base to enrich the details of Jesus as a person and his deeds, interpreting Jesus as the interface between divinity and humanity, conveying the "New Christian" thought with unifying tendencies common in his works [1]. Leonid Andreyev also participated in this movement. *Judas Iscariot* is a novella by Andreyev that synthesizes and selects plots from the four Gospels of the Bible. Unfolding from Judas's perspective, it reshapes the story of Jesus's preaching and passion, supplementing the reasons and details of Judas's betrayal found in the Bible. This is a work where religious emotion and anti-religious forces intertwine, ending in tragedy. The image of Judas under Andreyev's pen is unique and grotesque in speech and behavior, filled with tension triggered by his contradictory spirit and actions.

## 2. The Outsider and the Nihilistic Activist

Judas Iscariot appears as an image of a "marginal man" (outsider) in the world. From the opening of the novel, voices recount Judas's misdeeds. Because his appearance was "monstrous and ugly" (Andreyev, trans. He Qiao: *Satan's Diary*, Beijing: New Star Press, 2006, p. 82. Subsequent citations refer to this edition by page number only) and his character "false and deadly" (82), he was spurned by the world. Before coming to Jesus,

he was an aimless wanderer among men; after following Jesus, Judas was ostracized by all the disciples except Jesus. He occasionally vanished and occasionally reappeared, carrying his lowly body, feigning illness, and muttering all sorts of lies. John loathed him; Peter associated with him out of Jesus's tolerance; Thomas observed this chaotic companion with caution. After the village riot incident, Jesus also rejected Judas. Judas swallowed the dust alone behind the crowd; silence and loneliness surrounded him as always [2]. At the end of the story, Judas hangs himself outside Jerusalem, and his body is thrown into a remote ravine. As the man who betrayed Jesus, Judas is forever regarded by the world as a traitor in the retelling of the story.

"That skull was right there in the open, yet Judas thought they were hidden deep, covered by a thick and cunning invisible curtain that could completely block the eyes of others." (85) As an outsider, Judas actively maintained a distance from others. This distance is physically presented in the text: Judas appears in low places, in dark corners; he always schemes and weeps alone at night. Distance is also manifested in Judas's personality. He is adept at using lies, making it impossible for others to truly get close to him. Judas uses jokes to mock himself and others, and uses mockery to expose the shallowness of life; he even calls his father a goat. When Thomas persists in asking, "How can a goat be your father?" Judas answers, "You are so stupid, Thomas! What can you see clearly in a dream?" (89) Judas uses "dream" to refer to the present world. The illusoriness and distortion of the present world are carved into Judas's heart and govern his behavior. In Judas's view, "Thomas gets to the bottom of everything, but he knows nothing. His clear, bright eyes are so naive; through them, one can see the wall behind and the listless donkey tied to it" (91). To Judas, the search for logic and knowledge in the present world is meaningless. Based on this, seriousness and sublimity are absent in Judas's world. This is accompanied by his distrust and even contempt for those around him: "According to his view, so-called good people are those who are good at concealing their private deeds and thoughts, but if one were to embrace, caress, and thoroughly question such people, all the lies, ugliness, and deceit would flow out like pus from a festering wound." (86) Therefore, he repeatedly warns Jesus and the other disciples that the villagers harbor malicious intent and that the seeds of preaching will fall on rocks. In Judas's understanding, human malice is like a ceaseless wind, and Jesus's influence only allows the filth raised by the wind to gather temporarily in a corner, but the wind will never stop [3].

His cynical attitude towards the present world and lack of trust in others culminate in a lowly, lie-filled Judas. However, "while one half of his face twitched, revealing a comical ugliness, the other half floated slightly in solemn dignity." This "solemn dignity" comes from Judas's profound understanding and pessimistic view of humanity and the world. These factors gave birth to Judas's "comical ugliness," making him a thorough nihilist in action. Perhaps due to some psychological defense mechanism, or perhaps out of taste—we do not know the reason—Judas constantly mocks these "illusions and pessimism" as jokes. Relying on this recognition and loathing of the ugliness deep within human nature, combined with a sincerity and frankness inherent in his own nature, Judas is like old Karamazov: hypocritical in speech and shameless. He uses his feigned flattery and pretended illness to display this ugliness. Under this "acting," Judas's world is consistent; the ugly, boring world is so harmoniously matched with himself, who strikes the most ugly and boring pose within it, allowing him to adapt to such a world. This attitude towards life also gave him the most pessimistic foresight. He foresaw that the disciples would scatter when Jesus was killed. "During his solitary wanderings, Judas had long ago decided on the place of his suicide after Jesus's death." (137) He even foresaw Jesus's death, and that the only one accompanying the pure and good Son of Man would be himself—the one who loved Jesus with all his might after seeing through all worldly affairs. Such insight and pure love fueled Judas's arrogance. After setting the trap to betray Jesus, relying on the betrayal to gain a connection with Jesus, and relying on his self-perceived unique sobriety regarding himself and others, as well as his contempt for humanity, Judas ultimately never came together with anyone [4].

### 3. The Serpent and the Clothes Hook

Because of Judas's various misdeeds and betrayal, the crowd refers to him as Satan. Judas indeed possesses the qualities of the serpent in the biblical story; he does not love the people of the world, is "more crafty than any of the wild animals the Lord God had made" (The Holy Bible (Chinese Union Version), Shanghai: China Christian Council, 2008, p. 4), deftly drifting among calculating humans, intoxicated by his own lies and evil deeds.

Judas is skilled at using lies to cater to the psychology of others. John and Peter vie for the position of following Jesus into heaven; they ask for Judas's opinion separately. Judas gives affirmative answers to both, admitting to John that he is the first to accompany Jesus, and saying the same to Peter. However, when the crowd argues about this issue in front of Jesus, Judas "beat his chest with his bony fingers, proudly and solemnly declaring: Me! I will follow Jesus!" (105). His language also has the power to invert black and white. When Jesus and the others are attacked by villagers, Judas rushes into the crowd regardless of safety, using lies to confuse the truth, calling Jesus and the others liars and devils. The laughter provoked by Judas's various ugly antics calms the villagers' anger and protects Jesus. Regarding this, he claims: I gave them what they wanted, and they returned what I needed. As a tempter, Judas visits the high priest Annas several times, telling Annas that Jesus is a dangerous figure threatening law and power, and provides Annas with a convenient path to avoid slaughter while arresting Jesus [5]. He tempts the world to execute the innocent Son of Man, and Annas and the others indeed take the bait, offering only thirty silver pieces for Jesus's death. Judas argues with Annas in excitement, listing Jesus's virtues; that excitement is like the world playing right into his hands. People are always like this; they will kill the Son of Man, consistent with his perpetual distortion. His prejudice against the world and human nature conquered faith in Jesus.

Judas once told Thomas: "I serve as a clothes hook-John hung out his high morality, Thomas hung out his wisdom that has been eaten through by moths." (101) Being an outsider gave Judas a distance from which to scrutinize the crowd; the serpent's insight and temptation "aired out" (exposed) and magnified the banality of human evil within this distance. During the chaos caused by distrusting villagers during the preaching, Jesus and the group were saved by Judas's lies. The disciples' feelings toward Judas were very complex; they secretly rejoiced at escaping death thanks to Judas, but because of Jesus's great anger, they would not allow Judas to approach, screaming to drive their savior away from them. After shedding their worries, the "forgetful" crowd quickly forgot the matter, only complaining that Judas neglected his duty. In the struggle for the position of accompanying Jesus to heaven, John and Peter compared the depth of their love for Jesus, and Judas became the witness to this red-faced dispute. Jesus prophesied his imminent arrest; Peter stated his willingness to go to prison and die with the Teacher. But as the army approached, the love in the disciples' mouths that "would not abandon Jesus" disintegrated in the face of violence. Love for the Teacher could not plant courage in their hearts; they could not detach from their instinct to seek advantage and avoid harm. Facing the danger of imminent arrest and torture, the terrified crowd huddled together like lambs and then fled one by one. Peter also denied knowing Jesus three times. From that night until Jesus's martyrdom, Judas never saw another disciple by Jesus's side. After Jesus died, Judas told Annas and the others that they had killed an innocent man and betrayed humanity, but everyone turned a blind eye to Judas's grief and indignation, let alone engaged in self-reflection; they only held mockery for Judas. Although God is silent, human nature and conduct are far unworthy of love and kindness [6].

### 4. The Ambivalent Gambler

Although Judas is portrayed as having a lowly appearance, it is undeniable that he is extremely talented. To a large extent, Judas possesses characteristics of a modern man that do not belong to that era. He possesses strength; when competing with Peter in throwing stones, Judas demonstrated supernatural strength beyond others, elegantly

throwing a stone off a cliff that the crowd could not lift. This strength is accompanied by bravery; when villagers made things difficult for Jesus, it was Judas who threw himself at the crowd to save everyone. He is also the only one who bravely looks clearly at and faces human evil without sinking into it. He has speed; the text mentions three times that "Judas was like he had grown ten legs, rushing left and right very agilely" (91), running back and forth. He is result-oriented; in the village incident, although Judas used lies, he saved the Teacher beloved by the crowd and used his own strength to protect Jesus. In his view, what he said to the villagers was not another lie, but a reasonable exchange of interests; the means did not matter, what mattered was that Jesus was preserved. Judas once claimed in a conversation with Thomas that he was the noble and incomparably beautiful Judas. Indeed, Judas knows the complexity of human nature deeply. Assuming this world lacks goodness, Judas is the one with the courage to commit the most un-good acts, the one most adapted to the ugly rules of the world. "John gave him a lizard-I can give him a venomous snake. Peter throws stones-for him, I can move a mountain!" (98) He has the ability and possibility to do so; thus, he is "perfect."

"But what is a venomous snake? I can pull out its fangs immediately and coil it around my neck like a necklace. But what is a mountain that can be moved and flattened by hands and feet? I can give Judas, the heroic, most beautiful Judas, to him! If he dies at this moment, Judas will go to die with him." (98) Judas yearns for Jesus. During Judas's wanderings, he had already determined the location of his suicide after Jesus's death. Peter once asked Judas if he loved Jesus, because Judas seemed to love no one. At that moment, Judas, with a strange malice, refuted stiffly and harshly: "Love." Unlike the Jesus in the Bible who performs miracles and gives instructions, the Jesus in the novel is a nearly aphasic (voiceless) existence. He is frail and kind, and is also the only person in the novel who initially accepted Judas without prejudice. Even after Judas stole, Jesus still admonished the disciples that Judas was their brother. Judas chases this silent pure goodness at every moment. In his eyes, the surroundings are diffuse darkness; only Jesus and his raised arm shine brightly. Among all of Jesus's disciples, he can surmise Jesus's faintest wish not yet revealed, can perceive the mysterious depths of his feelings, and capture his fleeting melancholy and heavy momentary exhaustion. He offers him the most precious ambergris and myrrh, gathers beautiful flowers for him, and on the road to Jesus's execution, the Judas who betrayed him accompanies Jesus loyally and tenaciously.

Judas has a fanatical love and stubborn approach toward Jesus. The sublimity of this love, on one hand, allows Judas to make self-sacrifices; on the other hand, it leads to a distortion of the status quo and prospects of the present world, and to contempt and abandonment of all who do not embrace this sublimity. "The power and action of creating evil" and "the spirit toward goodness"-forces of two dimensions intertwine in the image of Judas. Judas is ambivalent (mixed/ambiguous); he is a person who thoroughly wields instrumental rationality as a weapon, yet in his heart prays for the warmth of value rationality, seeking redemption within the iron cage. However, Judas's act of confusing the truth offended Jesus, who signifies pure goodness. Although Jesus could tolerate the lying Judas, truth and pure goodness themselves cannot be defiled. To achieve the goal of protecting Jesus, Judas confused the facts, claiming Jesus was a liar; consequently, Jesus rejected Judas after the village incident. After Judas won the stone-throwing contest, amidst the harmonious atmosphere of the crowd, Jesus was very cold, and Judas was forever treated as an outsider. Regarding Judas, Jesus once gave a defining evaluation: "A withered fig tree that needs to be chopped down with an axe" (98). In the Gospel of Mark, the fig tree is described as having leaves but bearing no fruit, and is thus cursed by Jesus to wither. From the perspective of faith and goodness, Judas has a lack that is hard to make up for; his words and deeds are captured by contempt for the world from beginning to end. Judas hopes Jesus can chop away the withering on these fig trees, but Judas also questioned other apostles: "Does he (Jesus) understand anything about the human world, understand struggle?!" (135) The eyes of the world are covered with a film, unable to touch truth and goodness; therefore, Jesus's goodness is warm but powerless in the real world,



unable to display the "miracles" Judas expects. Meanwhile, the constructive power Judas possesses in a secular sense is, in Jesus's eyes, merely a fig tree with abundant leaves but no fruit. The two are forever separated; it is destined that Judas betrays Jesus with a kiss of love. "The time has come, the time has come, why does he not summon the strong and perfect Judas to his side?" (116) Such a plea receives no answer forever with Jesus's death.

Ultimately, Judas betrayed Jesus. Interestingly, Judas's actions were full of contradictions; he betrayed Jesus while simultaneously destroying the conspiracy. In fact, what Judas did was like a wager with the world, with Jesus's life as the stake. He wanted to see, on the two ends of the scale, who would win and who would lose in the struggle between the world governed by his distorted order and this Son of Man of pure goodness.

Judas placed bets on both sides. He took pleasure in the darkness; outside the door where soldiers tortured Jesus for fun, Judas also laughed, "as if someone's powerful hand tore open his mouth with iron fingers." (123) The moment Pilate sentenced Jesus to death, Judas frantically kissed the Roman governor's hand, praising Pilate's wisdom and nobility. However, Judas also called out "Hosanna." Jesus's journey to death made him feel heavy. Before committing the act of betrayal, he prayed to God to show him something to make him stay, but received only silent darkness. On the road following the executed Jesus, Judas walked with difficulty. He expected a miraculous salvation, warned the crowd of the dangers of the trip to Jerusalem, stole swords for the disciples hoping they would wake up, hoping the soldiers would stop torturing and prostrate themselves at Jesus's feet, hoping the disciples could ignore the fear of violence and snatch Jesus back from the executioners. "When they see the cross, when they see the nails, they will wake up, and then..." (128) When Jesus was nailed to the cross and still had a breath left, he hoped the mighty masses would stand with Jesus, "pull up the accursed cross from the ground, and with living human hands lift the free Jesus high above the darkness of the mortal world" (129). But nothing happened. Jesus died. The verdict of this gamble was settled. The crowd all fell; except for himself and Jesus, no one stood on God's side. God is a dream incompatible with the world; everything deserves to be thrown into the abyss.

After Jesus died, Judas felt the loneliness of the dust settling. The crown of secular victory pressed heavily on Judas's head. "What is the day? ... What is the sun?" (124) Judas asked. After Jesus was humiliated, the world and nature continued to revolve unaffected; Judas felt uncomfortable with this, sharing the weight of this suffering with Jesus. "Where there is sacrifice, there are executioners, and there are traitors!" (126) In the new world, Annas killed the innocent Son of Man for the price of merely thirty silver pieces, sending humanity into eternal damnation. The disciples ate and rested; they exonerated themselves of guilt. Jesus's death was beautified as a sacrifice bearing all human sin. They were powerless to fight the army, and their survival would pass Jesus's teachings to later generations. The order of these executioners and traitors was still running. After berating them one last time, Judas rushed toward death. The struggle brought by the two forces came to an end. Since Jesus was dead, the world had reached a verdict; Judas, this contradiction, also lost his target for goodness and the meaning of his existence. This conclusion was like his corpse, like a giant fruit "swaying above Jerusalem all night; the wind turned him, sometimes facing the city, sometimes facing the wilderness-it seemed to want to display Judas to both the city and the wilderness," hanging above the world.

## 5. The Reincarnator

Leonid Andreyev himself and his works were deeply influenced by Nietzsche's philosophy. His work *The Story of Sergey Petrovich* describes a university student who studied Nietzsche's philosophy all night and finally died for it. Judas's remarks before his suicide reflect a worldview with tendencies toward reincarnation (Samsara/Recurrence):

"Do you hear, Jesus? Now you believe me, right? I am going to you. Welcome me gently, I am tired. I am exhausted. Then I will be with you, embracing tightly like brothers, and we will return to the mortal world. Okay? ... I will forge steel in your hellfire and

destroy your heaven. Is that okay? Will you believe me then? Will you take me back to the human world then, Jesus?" (138)

Judas's despair for the world and the sacrifice of the two made him believe Jesus should understand and accept him. In Judas's vision, he and Jesus will resurrect and descend to the human world again. With the expectant "now" as the boundary, the past and future might become one thing. Judas will return like Sisyphus, experiencing this process of the generation or destruction of good again; the gamble will also be restaged. Judas and Jesus are imperishable; the dilemma of the clash between evil and good will exist eternally in human history and the soul.

## 6. Conclusion

The image of Judas under Andreyev's pen is ambivalent and full of tension. Judas embodies the contradictory spiritual experience of a transformative era: on one hand, the shattering and aphasia of traditional faith; on the other, the uncontrollable evil-creating power of humanity and the banal evil deeds of the blind. Judas Iscariot inherits the tradition of spiritual struggle of Russian intellectuals seeking God to gain life's purpose and meaning. It dissects the mystery of Christ's death, presenting a gamble between good and evil for the human soul through dramatic plots. Judas himself is the crucial driving factor, and this gamble ends with the victory of evil. In fact, Andreyev possessed a yearning for beauty and goodness as well as the struggle of wandering in the mortal world, but lacked the distinct piety of the Russians. He was full of pessimistic emotions toward modern society which lacked a soul. The "defense" made for Judas is more of a declaration of the negative nature of the world and a memorial article for Jesus and God. Judas's atomized, lonely survival experience and the banality of evil of the crowd also, to a large extent, prophesy the existential predicament of future humanity.

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