

## THE USE OF RELIGIOUS MOTIFS IN TEACHING LITERATURE AT HIGH SCHOOLS AND UNIVERSITIES IN BULGARIA

### **VYUŽÍVÁNIE NÁBOŽENSKÝCH MOTÍVOV VO VYUČOVANÍ LITERATÚRY NA STREDNÝCH ŠKOLÁCH A UNIVERZITÁCH V BULHARSKU**

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#### **Introduction**

The use of religious motifs in teaching literature reflects a long and complicated debate about both approaches to literary interpretation and the role of religion in modern education of a “post-communist” country such as Bulgaria. Religious motifs have been the subject of supranational studies, particularly after the emergence of modern literary studies of the Bible. Accordingly, there have been several stages of their recognition and application in Bulgarian literary studies since the beginning of the 1990s. Meanwhile, religious motifs in art have been studied for much longer.

The idea of the motif was initially developed in folkloristics in the 19th century. Terms such as *motif*, *plot*, and *theme* can be defined in different ways due to the fact that there is no continuity in usage, and often formal variations occur when they are used at different critical school and by different researchers. Formalism and structuralism provided the greatest impetus for updating the concept of the motif, which moves between texts and genres through time. Yet, in Bulgarian literary and folklore studies a single common definition of the motif is still lacking, despite numerous studies on mythological, ballad, fairy tale and religious motifs. The religious motifs are not only related to the organized system of beliefs and to the liturgical books, but there are religious motives based on legends, myths, folk practices; they can be interpretive, apocryphal, connected with Church history and hagiographical writings.

There are many examples in Bulgarian critical practice of using motifs as synonyms to the themes or problems in a literary work. Currently, most textbooks by prominent publishers of school textbooks offer teaching materials for literary interpretations based mainly on the author’s biography, in keeping with the old historicist approach. But the identification of small literary elements recurring in different languages and genres is actually part of the method of comparative literary analysis and thematic criticism. The religious motifs create intertextual connections between a literary work with the Bible and other books of the religious tradition.

#### **The concept of the motif in literary theory**

If we look at the etymology of the word *motif* – Latin *motivus*, derived from *movere* (to move), we discover that it implies movement, stimulus and dynamism. Furthermore, in addition to embodying the author’s idea in the literary work, the motif embodies known ideas and characters, and propels the plot. Some of the numerous dictionary definitions describe the motif as “a situation,

incident, idea, image, or character-type that is found in many different literary works, folktales, or myths; or any element of a work that is elaborated into a more general theme” (Baldick, 2001, p. 162), others as “one of the dominant ideas in a work of literature, a part of the main theme. It may consist of a character, a recurrent image or a verbal pattern” (Cuddon, 1992, p. 558). Scholars define it as an “atom of narrative” or “a product of a particular epistemological experience [...], transformational entirety in the text which sends its signals” (Евтимова, 1995, p. 41). When such an element recurs in a literary work, it is called *leitmotif* – a term which “comes from music criticism, where it was first used to describe the repeated musical themes or phrases” (Евтимова, 1995, pp. 138 – 139). There are some Latin aphorisms which function as motifs such as *Carpe diem; Ubi sunt?; Nihil novum sub sole; Psychomachia*. Since there is no agreement on the meaning of the term *motif*, and many divergences appear in dictionaries, textbooks, and critical reviews, we choose to trust some of the established theoretical schools and researchers dealing with the term. German critics precisely define the components of thematology. Goethe was the first to accept motifs as “phenomena of the human spirit, which have been repeated and will be repeated again and again” (Goethe, 1870, p. 773) and emphasized their great importance, real power and impact (Eckermann, 2006). Joseph Körner defines *motif* as “einen elementaren in sich einheitlichen Teil eines poetischen Stoffes” as well as “der Beweggrund für das Schaffen des Dichters” (1) (Körner, 1924, p. 83). He points out the existence of variations of motifs and claims that the effort to detect and identify these elements is much more meaningful for the periodization of an author’s work than the biographical method.

A significant contribution to the study of literary themes, plots, and motifs has been made by Elizabeth Frenzel – the author of *Motive der Weltliteratur*. She recognizes that academic publications have been limited mainly to static registration of motifs, which is very problematic and fails to represent their variable and branched system and relations (Frenzel, 1980, p. v). According to her, the motif should be explored in connection to the plot; if the plot is an entire melody, then the motif is only one chord. And while the plot is featured by specific names and events, in the motif they are anonymous and only provide an impulse that offers various embodiments of the act (Frenzel, 1980, p. vi). Therefore, the motif contains internal tension, something that can direct the reader to the idea of a historical, mythological or religious object linked to a specific event. Frenzel did not define as motifs such general concepts as *love, hate, friendship*, but rather the *proof of friendship*. The newly issued German dictionary, however, presents themes and motifs in literature as the foundation of literary art and as invariably connected (Daemmrich, 1995, p. xi).

In his later essay, the US scholar Stith Thompson, author of the six-volume *Motif indexation*, points out that “the ordinary processes of life are not motifs. A *mother* as such is not a motif. A *cruel mother* becomes one because she is at least thought to be unusual” (Thompson, 1972, p. 753). Thompson has undoubtedly contributed to the indexing of motifs and he is one of the first to pay special attention to religious motifs in his classification index V. 0-542 (Vol. 5).

The *Dictionary of Literary Themes and Motifs* states in its “Introduction” that the study of themes and motifs “provides insight not only into the mechanism of the literary clockwork, but also into the process of establishing and defining aesthetic value” and “characteristic prototypes, ‘protomotifs’, and ‘protothemes’” preferably identified in masterpieces are here assigned their proper role in literary history and criticism” (Seignuret, 1988, p. xvi). The author of the “Introduction” defines *the motif* as a thematological “all-pervading, deeper meaning element which may be psychological, philosophical, political, moral, sociological or religious in nature” (Seignuret, 1988, p. xvi). “According to that faith, the motif is the soul that undergoes a continuous thematic metamorphosis, passing into countless individual literary bodies, the works” (Seignuret, 1988, pp. xvii – xix).

Collecting, numbering and indexing literature components, even cataloguing the relationship between literary genres and periods by type, remained key aspects of the structuralist critical school in the 20th century. In such as Thompson’s and Seignuret’s works, where Western literature is reduced to a certain finite number of motif categories arranged in alphabetical order, a somewhat outdated literary methodology based on historical-geographical approach can be observed. For instance, a quick keyword search in WorldCat returns over a hundred different indexes of literary

motifs, most of them published at the end of the 20th century (Science Encyclopedia). Nowadays, the interest of American and European philologists in the problems of thematology, thematic criticism has not decreased. Russian researchers have published dozens of studies on the theoretical aspects of the motif in the past 20 years. This interest actually arises from formalism and Propp's morphological approach to the fairy tale, which interprets the motif as only a simple composition of *functions* – the term that replaces the *motif* in his research. According to other scholars, such as B. Putilov, there are three types of epic motifs: situations, speeches, and actions that in some sense determine the plot development (Силантьев, 2004, pp. 53 – 55).

The pragmatic approach offers a better synthesis, based on the main concepts of the semantic nature of the motif, asking not only “what a motif is” and “what its meaning and structure are”, but also “why it is used”, “what its current artistic sense is”, and “what its communicative intention is”. For this reason, the approach appears to be adequate for the study of contemporary fiction, at the same time helping to identify the central meanings and paradigms, reinforced by tradition, as well as the current sense of the work (Силантьев, 2004, pp. 68 – 72). Such an approach could be successfully applied to the teaching of literature at high schools and universities.

Current trends in literary criticism and analysis continue to illuminate connections and relationships between texts on the basis of motifs and their extraliterary origin. Since the motif is not explicitly formulated in the work, its recognition depends upon the reader's familiarity with texts and various cultural beliefs. There are many discussions of specific case studies and a large number of titles focused on the “treatment of” concrete texts, published annually in the MLA International Bibliography, such as Peter Lang's series of more than 120 volumes appearing since 1994 under the title *Studies on Themes and Motifs in Literature*. Werner Sollors in *The Return of Thematic Criticism* also draws attention to the fact that analysis based on the motif – intertextual, interdisciplinary, and comparative in nature – has never really gone out of style (Sollors, 1993).

One of the reasons for continued relevance of thematic criticism is its smooth entry both into older literary approaches (such as hermeneutics, formalism, structuralism) and into contemporary poststructuralist critical currents (deconstruction, feminism, psychoanalysis). In *Anatomy of Criticism*, Northrop Frye also describes the thematic approach as focused on the *mythos* (plot), *ethos* (including both characters and setting), and *dianoia* (thought or topic) (Frye, 2000, p. 52). According to him, motifs are connected with symbols and signs, which in the arbitrary viewpoint replace and mean things beyond their location or occurrence, and represent verbal elements or units with a wide range of meanings (Frye, 2000, p. 91).

The consideration of motifs requires a critical approach that would position the word in the study of literature as a whole. It is clear to Frye (2000, p. 101) that a deficiency in contemporary education often complained of, the disappearance of a common cultural ground which makes a modern poet's allusions to the Bible or to Classical mythology fall with less weight than they should, has much to do with the decline in the explicit use of archetypes.

Understanding knowledge at the level of conceptual connections can be achieved under the condition of their construction and management. The patriarchs, Jesus Christ, the apostles may not be the heroes of a novel, but their presence can be completely embedded in the novel. So “the motif provides a royal road to the collective unconscious, indicating ways in which experience is conceptualized” (Bremond – Landy, 1995, p. 4). And if the reader is unable to recognize such implications, the whole interpretation falls into the abyss of cultural ignorance.

Intertextual repetitions can express artistically innovative casual motifs belonging only to a given artistic purpose in its aesthetic uniqueness. These repetitions such as allusions, reminiscences, quotations, analogies, and unintentional coincidences express fundamental trans-historical motifs belonging to the tradition (Словарь, 2003, pp. 173, 176). Turning to one or another religious motif may be just a quotation (the motif or motif complex enter into the text as the subject of parallelism), an assimilation (implicit presence of a motif – concerning the opposite sex, in a different order, watered-down; even the name of a character can update a traditional story of Christian art and literature – Peter, for instance, is a name carrying with it the solidity of the rock motif), or a dissipation of a hypermotif (e.g., the worldwide catastrophe motif expressed by breaking

the Sun chariot) (Словарь, 2003, pp. 180 – 181).

### Observations about the place of religious motifs in literature

Religious motifs have their permanent place in the structure of a great number of European literary works, since it is a culture with Christianity at its core. Similarly, undeniable is also the presence of such motifs in fiction written in Bulgarian from the middle of the 19th century, when the new national literature's foundations have been laid. Biblical motifs defined the theme of God's people and have been mainly related to a few key points: Creation, The Fall, punishment, redemption, the Second Coming of Christ, and the Apocalypse. As motif complexes, these concepts have a consistent set of values enshrined in them genetically, which are updated during their literature life.

Since most significant English-language works have been translated into Bulgarian in the second half of the 19th century (such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet*, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Bunyan's *Pilgrim's progress*, Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*) and are cited as the motif "reservoir", it is necessary to clarify that their authors actually borrowed many ideas from the Bible. Most of these first translations were done with spiritual empathy and appreciation in mind, and the translators had a clear awareness of the formative power of the religious code. The system of narrative poetics of these authors, as well as others, like Dickens, includes mythological, fairy, and religious motifs. However, there are such "profane" motifs that receive their content and meaning through their connection with religious motifs or in comparison with them.

In some parts of a text, religious motifs are prominently expressed, and their presence is clear; elsewhere they are less obvious, and more scattered, and it is hard to find a motif nest. Yet their effect emanates from the plot, and the motif subsequently becomes the religious background of the work. It can be encrypted and not mentioned directly but it points in that direction. Some of the motifs are implanted as fragments of the key points in the main embedding text, while others are more complete and compactly presented. Such motifs are of paramount importance for understanding the artistic sense and the deeper meaning of the text. During the Bulgarian Revival and up until the end of 19th century, they are easily recognizable in the cultural context, the reader is conscious of them, and there is no strict religious censorship. The active use of religious motif complexes is typical of this era, when the society is still based on a traditional system of values. The time between two World Wars is also favourable to an increased attention to the philosophical and the religious contexts. In the next period (1944 – 1989), there was no interest in religious elements in the text at all; the lack of attention to the religious undertones of a work culminates in complete disregard and censoring. Their existence as themes and motifs is not even mentioned in classifications, bibliographies, and research of translated and original literature. In fact, the topic of religion itself was discredited during that period due to its ideological connotations. Little by little, these trends were resolved by the end of 1990s and thematic criticism again became the focus of attention, this time in the headlines of multiple exams for high schools and universities, such as: *The Home and the Way*, *The Mother and the Country*, *The Death and the Sacrifice*, *Sin and Redemption*, *Man and God*.

An internationally recognized contribution to the study of the motif was made by Tzvetan Todorov, a Franco-Bulgarian literary and semiotic theorist, in his *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage* (Todorov, 1979). Other Bulgarian scholar, Michail Arnaudov, is also known for his detailed study of ballad and folklore motifs in Bulgarian folk culture and literature concerning the *division between two brothers* and the *immurement of the bride's shadow*. (2) Two modern researchers are of note: Ljubomira Parpulova, who mainly explore motifs in *Bulgarian fairy tales* (1978), and Nikolay Aretov who focuses on translated fiction from the early 19th century, paying particular attention to the *abducted faith* and *unhappy family* (1990). However, the topic can be found mainly in various conference proceedings. The main problem is that academic publications do not reach school teachers and students. The authors of textbooks and handbooks hardly apply advanced academic knowledge in their presentation of lessons. Students may only rely on the responsibility of the teachers themselves to compensate for these deficits.

Such an example is the lesson for Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. In none of the six textbooks approved by the Bulgarian Ministry of Education for literature classes in the 10th grade (compulsory schooling) is there an indication of its significance as a "spiritual autobiography". Only one of the handbooks points out the allusion to the motif of the *Prodigal Son*. The Biblical themes in Defoe's novel are fully tracked only in *The Bible in Literature Classes* (Христова, 2002, pp. 68 – 70). In none of the approved textbooks and handbooks is there a record of deeper allusions in the life of Robinson to other Biblical characters like Job and Jonah, for which repeated implicit and explicit references exist in the novel (Pileva, 2013, p. 126). *A History of English Literature* by Marko Minkoff (1998) also lacks an in-depth interpretation through a religious prism and with focus on the religious connotations of images. However, literary critics and authors of textbooks will have fulfilled their cultural and educational mission only after they convey the meaning and express the importance of religious motifs to the cultural imagination of the words they discuss.

If we choose to represent the text of a fiction as a starry map, the motifs could be presented as different constellations on its sky. Such constellations fill the structure and set the matrix of the text. How many stars will be found by the recipients and how bright they will shine for them depend on their cultural competencies. As the most resilient in literature are undoubtedly the mythological and religious motifs which can contain several components that are repeated in different literary works and combined in different themes and plots. A typical example of a skilful use of the *Prodigal Son* motif is Defoe's novel. The origin of the motif contains following parts: taking one's heritage, leaving the house without the father's blessing, journeying on the way to and in a foreign country, losing everything, repentance, returning home, acceptance by the father, and rejection by the elder brother. The *Robinson Crusoe* novel repeats six of these components: leaving the house without the father's blessing, journeying to and in a foreign country, losing everything (here there is a variation on the motif, because the hero manages to save some food, weapons, Bibles from the ship), repentance, returning home and rejection by the elder brother (here the position of the brother is assumed by the sisters and nephews).

Here the teachers and lecturers may use new technologies to show the constellation of the *Prodigal Son* on the sky map and ask the students to fill the components of the motif, discovering the different parts/stars on it. Also there are other Biblical motifs in the text which will compose other constellations. So the students finally can acquire a pictorial image of the motifs in the novel. And if they explore this map, they can also discover that the *Prodigal Son* motif is the main motif, which became the underlying thematic motif of the whole novel, defining the boundaries of the plot.

## Discussion

Most Bulgarian literary critics explore religious motifs in their articles without providing a special definition of the nature of the term, so that often it overlaps with the theme. Actually, the problem begins with the discrepancy in specialized dictionaries of literary terms. In Bulgaria there are more than six dictionaries where the motif is defined differently. The most comprehensive in terms of its treatment of the concept of the motif is *Енциклопедичен речник* (2001), modelled on the German Duden. The definition there considers the motif to be a "thematic, situational related literary element whose content base can be schematically described". The different motifs include: *situation* (enmity between brothers, love between rival families), *figures and characters* (weird people, evil women), *localities or places* and *time* (p. 270). This dictionary offers very clear definitions and can be systematically used in teaching literature at high schools and universities.

Coherence and consistency in the use of the term *motif*, and of *religious motifs* in particular, are lacking in teaching literature. The reference to religious motifs is poorly developed and the teachers do not feel prepared enough to present it with sufficient confidence. They are forced to trust their intuition when explaining such themes and motifs. That is why there is a need of defining the role of the motif in the teaching model and illustrating its adequate use. (3) First the motif must take its place among the key terms in the curriculum of the Bulgarian Ministry of Education. Although it is not mentioned there as a specific term, in a literature textbook for the 5th grade in secondary schools, the folklore lessons include a definition of the *motif* as "a part of the theme that is repeated

in various literary texts” (Герджикова – Попова, 2006, p. 34), but the concept is not always clearly understood and the students gain the impression that the analysis cannot go beyond the basic elements, such as *plot* and *characters*.

In fact, the textbooks contain numerous exercises in which students are tasked with finding the motifs or explaining their place in a literary work, but the motif has no status as a term at all; it exists without its own referent in the nominal vocabulary of most teachers in high schools. There is no clear conceptual framework in which this term is positioned. At universities, the situation is slightly better; there are even some specialised courses, such as *Religious Motifs in Western Literature*, *Biblical Themes in Literature*, *Bible and Bulgarian Literature*, and *Bible as Literature*, but the status of the term has not been fully clarified yet.

The other problem for high schools and some universities is that literature programs are not updated in a timely manner; instead, they are neglected because of contemporary social and personal needs and interests. Even though that the different textual approaches are presented to the students, the literary education in most cases fits in the biographical and textual analysis, striving to reconstruct the original and to place it in a biographical context where the text becomes a document of the writer's personality or, in a historical context, of the era which it reflects. For a work to be explored in view of the author's experiences is the same as evaluating a portrait by its model. Simultaneous introduction of constructivism as an educational paradigm, deconstruction as a style of critical thinking, looking for contradictions and prejudices through the analysis of formal elements, together with the “archaeology of knowledge” and hermeneutics in learning literature may, however, question the national ideology set out in the standards and programs of the Ministry of Education (Дамянова, 2012, p. 38). That is why a strong opposition persists against such as Damyanova's ideas for the possibility of the inclusion of these critical approaches in literature education at high schools, featured in her book, and they seem to need a long time before being realized, understood, and put into practice.

In order to increase the awareness of eternal themes and motifs, which have left their imprint on literary texts, it was necessary to go a long way in Bulgaria. Since the beginning of the 90s, the need of positive appreciation of the religious Biblical heritage has become clearer. One had to go an even longer way in order to understand the need of religious motifs in the textual materials for learning and teaching literature, focusing on the importance of Biblical knowledge for cultural and national growth. By updating the debate on religion – literature during the past 28 years, we have come to the recognition that the Bible continues to deliver images, themes, and motifs for many writers and poets. Likewise, the postmodern condition is indebted to the Christian tradition as a cultural dominant whose achievements are expressed by most contemporary literary theories.

## **Conclusion**

The study of literary texts should not be limited only to the origin of religious motifs. Rather, there is a need to review how they function and acknowledge the fact that their meaning can change depending on the context or their combination with other motifs, e.g., whether they are a primary or secondary motif. Possibly due to overuse, some religious motifs may be emptied of meaning and parodied. That is why their semantic changes are important, as well as the separation of the motifs from their variants, the semantic reconstruction of complex motifs, the performance of the relationship between the motifs in the structure of the work, and the meaning that occurs at the nexus of these interconnections.

In literary studies, teachers and lecturers have to pay attention to both aspects of the motif – as the author's inspiration for the work and as an integral part of its structure, referring to other works from the literary tradition. Through such a study of a single motif may be considered, on the one hand, the individual author's approach to understanding the specific motifs and, on the other, the mechanism of interaction of different cultures and literatures and relevant translations by which works can cross their chronotopic limits. It is also necessary to systematize clear concepts for presentation of the literary material at high schools and universities through the study of motifs, including religious ones, which would help to fill many knowledge gaps.

The interpretation through a Biblical perspective specifies the importance of not only the cultural context of a literary work, but determines the textual elements which relate it to the hypotext – the elements that carry more ancient messages that have preserved their value in the dynamic literary stream. The motif study for this point of view should precede the study of the context. And it will contribute to enhancing the impact on the students' interpretative competences within literary classes and sessions where the Biblical imagery and motifs are discussed. Due to the obvious role of such textual elements in the main work's interpretation, students can better understand the work and approach its overall importance.

George Steiner in *Science Encyclopedia* presents: Culture as a matrix of recurrent and interrelated elements. Broadly speaking, cultural literacy relies on our ability to recognize these constants – in literature, music, painting, or any other form of cultural production – and to work out the relationship between them, to translate and recycle the meaning we inherit from them. (4)

Its main thesis is that “elementary” allusions and “implicit motifs” go unrecognized even by today's most “privileged students and readers”. The relationship between religion and literature is solid and has existed for thousands of years, and not just on an aesthetic basis. With its continuing presence, the Biblical text sanctifies and inspires literature and needs to be recognized by modern readers, for the understanding and interpretation of texts is not only the task of literary science, but extends to human culture, wisdom, and experience as a whole.

### Notes

- (1) “Complete elementary part of a literary plot” as well as “the driving reason for the creativity of the poet”.
- (2) He is quoted in a bibliography of indexes as the author of one of the first classification attempts of fairy tales (Azzolina, 1987).
- (3) Similar approach based on thematics and problematics is applied in the approved Poland textbooks after 1989 and the feedback is positive.
- (4) <http://science.jrank.org/pages/7889/Motif-in-Literature>

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## Resume

This paper addresses the importance of the thematic criticism and recovery of the place of the religious motifs in the literary analysis. The objective of the presented paper is, first, to identify some key aspects in the development of motif theory based on the achievements of well-known researchers in the field of thematology. Furthermore, the paper addresses the issue of the partial disregard of Biblical motifs in Bulgarian educational materials after 1989 as a result of communist heritage. The research question concerns the effect of introducing the Biblical imagery and motifs on the learners' literary interpretive competences. It also tries to point out possible strategies for improving the reception of such motifs and offers an innovative way of introducing such textual elements. Since the motifs are not explicitly formulated in the original authors work, every lecturer must be able to identify them and to determine their place in the structure of that work. The paper argues that teaching should focus only on the study of the original Biblical texts but on pointing to the way certain Biblical elements function and on drawing the learners' attention to the fact that their meaning can change depending on the context. The paper emphasizes the need for including religious motifs in the textbooks and instruction materials for learning and teaching literature, as well as the importance of Biblical knowledge for cultural growth and shaping aesthetic taste.



### **About author**

Maria Emilova Pileva defended her PhD of Bulgarian literature in 2016. Her main research area and subareas are literature, religion, theory of translation. She had specializations in Vision International University (1995 – 1996) and in Eberhard-Karls Universität (2015 – 2016). She has 13 scientific publications in Bulgarian and 1 in English.

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