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A Metaphor for Evil. *Mother Joan of the Angels* by Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz

Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz (1894–1980) wrote the novella *Mother Joan of the Angels* (*Matka Joanna od Aniołów*) during the Second World War, in 1942 and 1943, and read it publicly for the first time at a secret literary evening. Although he was already an established author by this time – after studying law and musicology in Kiev, he moved to Warsaw, where, in the interwar 1920s, he became actively involved in the city's literary life as a member of the literary group Skamander;¹ during the Second World War, he and his wife, Anna Iwaszkiewicz, maintained cultural life on their Stawisko estate near Warsaw and offered

1 In addition to Iwaszkiewicz, the poetic literary group Skamander, which was active from 1919 until the end of the 1930s, consisted of poets Jan Lechoń (1899–1956), Antoni Słonimski (1895–1976), Julian Tuwim (1894–1953) and Kazimierz Wierzyński (1894–1969). The authors initially published their works in the journal *Pro Arte et Studio*, later renamed *Pro Arte* (1916–1919), but subsequently issued their own literary magazine *Skamander* (1920–1928, 1936–1939), as well as publishing in the weekly *Wiadomości Literackie* (1924–1939). They organised literary meetings in the Warsaw cafe Pod Picadorem. While the contemporaneous avant-garde poetry groups that emerged in the major Polish cities after the First World War (e.g., the Kraków avant-garde, the Futurists) declared the guidelines of their artistic creativity in manifestos, the Skamanders consciously eschewed an official literary programme. In contrast to the poetry of the Young Poland authors, which was oriented towards the principle of *l'art pour l'art*, and unlike the poetic experiments of avant-garde groups, the poetics of the Skamanders promoted the connection of poetry with everyday life, simple people and nature, advocating understandable language and destroying the cult of the poet as an exceptional personality who is above the masses of average people. The vitalism and communicativeness of the poetry of the Skamander writers brought it enduring popularity.

shelter to artists² – the listeners were not overly impressed by the text. During the German occupation of Poland and the preparations for the Warsaw Uprising, which began one year later in 1944, the public expected a certain degree of engagement from literary texts. However, the events in Iwaszkiewicz's novella do not take place during the Second World War, and evil is not depicted as an immanent characteristic of a foreigner or occupier. Instead, the text deals with the topic from a historical distance and from a philosophical and anthropological perspective (Graf 1999: 93–94).

The novella was published in book form in the collection *New Love* (*Nowa miłość*) in 1946, at a time when Polish literature was dominated by reflections on the end of the war (Tadeusz Borowski, Zofia Nałkowska, Jerzy Andrzejewski, etc.). Consequently, the work again represented a kind of deviation, giving rise to attempts to interpret it in terms of an indirect response to the events of the war. With his shift to historical themes (in addition to *Mother Joan of the Angels*, he also wrote the novella *The Battle on the Plain of Sedgemoor* [*Bitwa na równinie Sedgemoor*] during the war, in which the material is related to a seventeenth-century battle in England),³ Iwaszkiewicz deals with the issue of human consciousness and morality, which, in extreme circumstances, are directly faced with evil, terror and hatred. The historical theme allows him to establish a certain distance, thus enabling a different perspective and fresh reflection on the meaning and causes of human reactions, and permitting doubt about the meaning of certain historical events (Wyka 1968: 223–226; Zaworska 1985: 57–63).

The first edition of the collection *New Love* was accompanied by a quote from Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, aka Witkacy (1885–1939): “In both angelism and devilry, it is a question of intensity – and this is what our literature lacks”. There was also an explanation by the author in the introduction:

It is true that the events partly described in this narrative happened in another place, under a different sky and in a different atmosphere. The transferal of these events to our border regions was simply to make their strangeness more accessible to the author. [...] I found a certain charm in these fragments and gaps. (Witkiewicz in: Melikowski 1997: 47)

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- 2 The artists' meetings, readings, recitals and discussions in Stawisko continued after the war, as well. From the 1950s onwards, Iwaszkiewicz held important positions in the literary field (from 1953, he was the chief editor of the literary journal *Twórczość*, and from 1959, he served as the president of the Polish Writers' Association), so his support meant a kind of springboard for young writers. He continued to create literary works until his death, publishing several poetry collections and writing novels, short prose, plays, essays and treatises, as well as translating.
 - 3 Although these novellas do not address the war directly, Iwaszkiewicz did not avoid topics related to the Second World War in his works, e.g., in the novellas *The Mill on the Lutynia* (*Młyn nad Lutynią*) and *The Old Brickyard* (*Stara cegielnia*).

Loudun and Ludyń: Chronotope

As Iwaszkiewicz explained in the introduction to the first edition, the material for the story was taken from real events. In the Ursuline convent in the French town of Loudun in 1633, several cases of possession appeared among the nuns. Their unusual behaviour gave rise to different interpretations: in addition to the opinion that the nuns were possessed by the devil, there was also conjecture about a psychological or political background. A local priest, Urbain Grandier, was said to be a political and personal opponent of Cardinal Richelieu, and the nuns' possession was apparently feigned until Grandier's conviction and death at the stake⁴ (Graf 1999: 109).

Iwaszkiewicz transferred the plot to the fictitious town of Ludyń in the then eastern border region of Poland near Smolensk. Father Józef Suryń, a Jesuit and exorcist, is sent to Ludyń with the task of expelling the demons from the Ursuline sisters. He dedicates himself most intensively to the exorcism of the convent's mother superior, Mother Joan of the Angels. In performing the exorcism, he realises that the mother superior will only be cured if he takes the possession upon himself. In order to prove to Satan that he has surrendered to him completely, Suryń murders two farmhands with an axe.

The literary Ludyń is a small town with an Ursuline convent built in 1611. Surrounded by forests and marshes, this sparsely populated town is located far from the main roads and has only a small Catholic community. The muddy and dark streets, in which goats and pigs are wandering, are lined with damp wooden houses. Suryń had no desire to come to this place. While the local residents do not seem to be bothered by the town's image and atmosphere, it makes Suryń feel uneasy and reinforces his sense of alienation. From his small monastic cell, which protected him from the outside world, he has come to a secluded place where the inquisitive inhabitants follow his every step in anticipation of what will happen. In the monastery, he was able to control the inexplicable evil that he felt deep inside, but in Ludyń, he finds himself in an unknown, unfriendly environment. The unpleasant image of the literary space enhances the tension in the narrative, which is created by the flowing dialogues and emphasised motives, as well as the suspense and horror of the plot. Father Suryń is sent to Ludyń because he is regarded as an experienced exorcist. He sets

4 The possession of the nuns in Loudun also provided material for later works, e.g., Aldous Huxley's novel *The Devils of Loudun* (1952), John Whiting's play *The Devils* (1960), Krzysztof Penderecki's opera *The Devils of Loudun* (1969) and Ken Russell's film adaptation *The Devils* (1971).

off in early September and spends a few weeks in the town. The narrative condenses the key events of these weeks, which turn out to be fateful for his psyche and his future life. It emerges that he, too, is weak, emotional, prone to fluctuating moods and afraid of loneliness. In a brief analepsis, the reader learns that Suryn entered the monastery at a very young age to fill the void left by the loss of his mother. He has little experience of life outside the monastery walls, and he overcomes his psychological anguish with physical self-punishment. He is troubled by the fact that he constantly witnesses evil around him, and even more so that he feels the germ of evil within himself. These feelings are exacerbated by the events in Ludyń, until he finally concludes a pact with the devil.⁵

Demons, Human Nature or Personal Trauma?

Suryn's external and internal tragedy merely represents the overarching layer of the plot, serving as a framework for the moral, social and religious conflicts exposed or merely hinted at in the novella. Probably the central question is who or what is possessing the Ursuline sisters.

The local community and wider society accept the fact that the nuns have been possessed by the devil. This interpretation is also confirmed by the Church, at least officially.⁶ The demons possessing the sisters cause them to behave strangely: screaming, howling, contorting their bodies, climbing around the church, giving terrifying looks or lustfully obeying the orders of the priests, falling to the ground in front of the Holy of Holies, licking the altar steps, etc. In this respect, the lead is taken by Mother Joan of the Angels, the mother superior of the convent, who claims to be possessed by eight demons. The most horrific scenes occur during the public exorcism, which is performed – largely unsuccessfully – by four priests who reside permanently in the convent. Not only are the parishioners permitted to be present at the exorcisms, but other people travel to the ceremonies

5 The motif of a pact with the devil, which is familiar from the legend of Faust and was made famous by Goethe's *Faust*, is explored by Thomas Mann in a similar way to Iwaszkiewicz in the novel *Doctor Faustus* (1947). Both works were written during the Second World War and published after its conclusion. Unlike in Iwaszkiewicz's novella, where evil is immanent to man, nature and history, the central character in Mann's novel decides freely to cooperate with the devil (Melikowski 1997: 54, 55).

6 Some representatives of the Church are critical of this interpretation: "Father Brym looked at the sickly frowning forehead for some time, as if he was considering whether to say what he thought. He finally made up his mind. 'Unless there are no devils there at all!'" (Iwaszkiewicz 1965: 35). Even among the visitors to the inn in Ludyń, there are vague rumours about other possible causes of the possession.

from afar, including the most important public figures, even Prince Jakub. Priest Lactantius is convinced that “if the people see the devil, their belief in God and the Catholic Church is reinforced” (Iwaszkiewicz 1965: 34). For the people, a visit to Ludyn’ represents a pilgrimage that includes a special performance, like going to a fair or the theatre, only the performance is more terrifying. For the surrounding innkeepers and merchants, the event is a source of income.

In this regard, certain questions arise concerning:

- social morals (Does society have such low moral values that watching the suffering of the sisters is considered acceptable? How is it that they are not outraged by the groundless death sentence pronounced against Priest Garniec? Why do the local people fail to take any action when they suspect that the possession is feigned?),
- weariness (Isn’t it enough for the people to relax by attending fairs, theatres or other events or do they need a performance with more intensity?),
- profiteering (Doesn’t earning money at the expense of the possessed sisters seem problematic to the people?).

On the other hand, issues arise regarding:

- the morality of Church institutions (Are the sisters really possessed by the devil, or is the Church merely taking advantage of the strange – possibly feigned – situation in the convent to gain believers or strengthen their faith, warn against sins, strengthen the patriarchy and enhance the reputation of the convent?),
- the cooperation between the Church and the secular authorities (Did Prince Jakub come to the exorcism ceremony in order to attract even more visitors with his participation, thereby giving additional weight to the event?⁷ Was Priest Garniec convicted for alleged sins, i.e., witchcraft, or for the fact that the queen did not like him?).⁸

It may be that the sisters are not possessed by demons at all, and their behaviour is due to their own psychological anguish and fears, traumas from childhood,

7 It turns out that Prince Jakub is not interested in the event at all; he even yawns during the most terrifying scenes of the exorcisms in the church. The question is whether he is so tired of various performances that even an event like this does not shock him, or perhaps he has been informed that the possession is only feigned. Apparently, he actually came to Ludyn’ due to financial dealings with Jews.

8 “[T]he queen did not like that dog because he barked too much” (Iwaszkiewicz 1965: 52).

the strict rules of monastic life, erotic longings, malice or arrogance, and desire for recognition. “Is this perhaps merely man’s inherent nature?” (Iwaszkiewicz 1965: 95), as the rabbi from Ludyń asks.

On arriving in Ludyń, Suryń is surprised by the way of life in the convent: the sisters do not live in a completely monastic cloister; in addition to the priests, other men live among them (a stoker and an organist), who help them and spy on them secretly when the opportunity arises. Among other things, the men slaughter animals for the sisters, betraying the fact that they eat meat, which is contrary to Suryń’s expectations. The former town priest, Urban Garniec, is said to have visited the sisters in their dreams and encouraged them to sin; it is because of him that the sisters ran around the garden naked. However, it is more likely that the sisters sought erotic experiences with the attractive priest and later accused him of witchcraft because he refused them.⁹ The bishop therefore issued a verdict to punish Priest Garniec by burning him at the stake, a ceremony that was also probably a kind of performance for the people.¹⁰

The only sister at the convent who does not show signs of possession is Sister Małgorzata. She is also the only one who is known to break the convent’s cloister from time to time by sneaking out to the inn to chat with the female innkeeper, as well as with the guests, and “perhaps it was precisely for this reason that Sister Małgorzata did not seek other changes, did not have visions, and avoided attention-grabbing incidents in general” (Iwaszkiewicz 1965: 49). Could it be that the other sisters are no longer able to live according to the strict monastic rules and their psychological anguish manifests itself in the so-called possession? Mother Joan of the Angels begs Suryń: “You have to save me from the abyss of this loneliness... into which God has thrown me...” (Iwaszkiewicz 1965: 44). Or are the nuns simply justifying their sins and desires with their possession? The male literary characters, in particular, see them through the stereotype of the woman who is sinful by nature, who is the source of evil (Father Brym) and destined to suffer (the rabbi).

Several of the literary characters have endured childhood traumas. Suryń, in particular, resorts to his childhood memories in the most difficult moments.

9 Father Brym: “[I] think that these sisters really wanted Garniec to come to them, and that they became obsessed with these desires” (Iwaszkiewicz 1965: 33). At the same time, Suryń also learns that Garniec “was not exactly a saint”, as he violated celibacy and had two children with a girl from the town.

10 “But he squealed like a pig”; “‘The clothes themselves burn first and the man remains naked’, explained Odryń matter-of-factly” (Iwaszkiewicz 1965: 23). Similarly, the arrival of Suryń in Ludyń represents a new attraction for the people. Father Brym remarks to Suryń: “It is thanks to you, Father, that there is such a crowd” (Iwaszkiewicz 1965: 38).

His father beat him as a child, but he found refuge with his mother. His trauma began at the age of thirteen when his widowed mother abandoned him and entered a Carmelite convent. Mother Joan of the Angels, the daughter of a wealthy man from the Smolensk area, is humpbacked. Due to her physical disability, she could not fulfil her father's vision of an ideal daughter, and subsequently a wife and mother, which was most likely the reason she had to enter a convent. Sister Małgorzata's poem also tells of the hardships and fears of girls: "My beloved mother, / I will be a nun! / Because I do not want to wed / with the first one I get! // With a cane, my husband would / drive me on, / so that he would not kill me... / I would rather be a nun!" (Iwaszkiewicz 1965: 55).

Mother Joan of the Angels is also driven by a strong desire for recognition. She wants to become a saint but realises that this is beyond her reach. Her fear of becoming just another bored nun is so great that she surrenders to the devil or feigns possession and finds her fame in this way. She is proud of the fact that of all the nuns in the monastery, she is possessed by the most demons and is the most renowned. The fact that her actions lead to Priest Garniec being wrongly accused, leaving his two children orphaned, and that she will also ruin Suryn, is of no consequence to her.

The Rabbi and the Jewish Community

In addition to the tragedy of the individual literary characters, the novella highlights the issue of the cohabitation of the Polish and Jewish communities. The Jews and the Catholics in Ludyń do not mix, even though they have similar concerns: there are cases of possession in both communities. Rabbi Reb Ishe takes care of exorcism in the Jewish community. After the failure of his exorcisms, a desperate Father Suryn crosses the border between the two communities and approaches the rabbi to talk about demons. The conversation is full of tension, despite the fact that the two men have common concerns regarding the creation of the world and the meaning of suffering: "But if the world was created by God, then why is there so much evil in it? Death, disease and armies? Why is he persecuting us Jews? [...] Why do they kill our sons, defile our daughters?" (Iwaszkiewicz 1965: 97).

The attempt at cooperation between the two communities fails to bear fruit. The rabbi is indignant that the priest, who has previously avoided him, has the nerve to turn to him for advice when he can no longer see a way out himself, expecting immediate and unconditional assistance. On the other hand, Suryn's already battered psyche is finally destroyed by the meeting: it is just after the

rabbi's visit that he realises that the demons have taken possession of him.¹¹ At the same time, his ears are ringing with the rabbi's statement "I am you – you are me!" (Iwaszkiewicz 1965: 100), which remains unexplained.

Internal Form of the Novella

In terms of its internal form, the novella follows a mirror scheme and gains coherence from repeated motifs. It starts and ends in the inn of the Roma woman Awdosia on the route to and from Ludyń. In both the Ludyń inn and the Roma's inn, the revelry is interrupted when Suryń enters. In the entrance hall of the Roma's inn, Suryń almost trips over an axe, and on his return from Ludyń a few weeks later, he takes the axe from the same place. It is here that Suryń first meets the traveller Wołodkiewicz, who accompanies the priest to the town and then observes him constantly from the background during his stay. After Suryń's failed mission at the convent, he is again joined by Wołodkiewicz as he leaves the town.

The motif of the axe is emphasised several more times: the monastery stoker explains to Suryń that it is his job to chop firewood, and Suryń recalls his youth and the family farmhand Mykita, who was killed with an axe by an enraged peasant. After arriving in Ludyń, the farmhands Kaziuk and Juraj talk before going to bed about the existence of the devil and about Juraj's fears that he will be possessed by the devil and kill his hated father with an axe.

Other key motifs are repeated in a similar way: during the farmhands' conversation, bells ring in the background, and Kaziuk explains that they are tolled by order of the Ludyń bishop to warn travellers wandering in the forest against wolves. The conversation about the devil, possession, Juraj's father and the tolling of the bell for wandering travellers is repeated in the inn stable before the death of the two farmhands. The motif of the forest and wolves appears several more times: when Suryń is shaken by the unsuccessful exorcism of the devil, Father Brym advises him to take a walk in the forest; Suryń observes the children's game "hunting and scaring away the wolves",¹² which he does not understand; and when Suryń sets out for the forest, he meets Kaziuk on the way, who warns him against the "wolf" Wołodkiewicz.

11 While Wołodkiewicz and Suryń are climbing to the rabbi's quarters, the former makes a meaningful remark: "What brazen stairs these are! I suppose they lead to hell!" (Iwaszkiewicz 1965: 93).

12 In the game, two children imagine wolves that frighten Krysia, while her brother Alunio goes on an imaginary hunt.

The Ambiguity of the Literary Characters

On reading the novella, the question arises as to the real identity of Wincenty Wołodkowicz. He presents himself as a poor nobleman who travels from place to place, as he is struggling to survive on his own estate. However, the character of Wołodkowicz remains unclear. His external appearance is unusual (small, hamster-like, stubby teeth, purple gums, large black eyes, black vulture-like fingers, etc.), and his behaviour is intrusive. After meeting Suryń in the Roma's inn, he constantly lurks around him and questions him. When Suryń makes the sign of the cross in front of Wołodkowicz, the traveller jumps away in fear. Wołodkowicz is interested in all of the rumours circulating in Ludyń, especially those about sin and adultery, and he encourages Sister Małgorzata to drink and socialise with men, as well as helping her to escape from the convent. In the Roma's inn, Wołodkowicz points out the axe to Suryń when he stumbles upon it in the dark. Moreover, it is Wołodkowicz who takes Suryń to the rabbi for a talk, after which the Jesuit's possession by Satan is complete. Is Wołodkowicz really just an intrusive nobleman? Could he be an assistant to the devil leading Suryń into a trap? Is he perhaps even the devil himself in human form?

What really happened to Father Suryń in Ludyń? Did he fall in love with Mother Joan of the Angels and become possessed because of the sin he had committed? What happened between them during the exorcisms in the attic? Did he kill the two farmhands simply to prove to the devil that he had truly and completely surrendered himself to him? Why did Suryń choose the farmhands Kaziuk and Juraj as his victims, when they were among the few people for whom he had felt any affection during his visit to Ludyń? Was it just because they were without sin and – so the priest believed – would therefore go to heaven in any case? Was Suryń's possession actually due to his own traumas and fears, with the events in Ludyń only fuelling his mental crisis? Speaking to Suryń, the rabbi remarked: "But all of the evil that a person commits does not explain the evil that torments one" (Iwaszkiewicz 1965: 97). Suryń learned this lesson himself after his own crime, when the demons returned to the mother superior and possessed her again. His sacrifice was in vain.

A Metaphor for Evil

Just a few years after Suryń's departure, Mother Joan of the Angels recovered and subsequently led the monastery until her death. Sister Małgorzata returned to Ludyń after her elopement and affair with Chrząszczewski and became

one of the most pious and industrious nuns at the convent. The farmhands Kaziuk and Juraj were buried, and Father Suryń was most likely taken back to his monastery cell by the provincial minister.

The tragic external events in Ludyń more or less successfully draw to a conclusion or settle down. However, the question of the inner hardship and anguish of the literary characters remains unresolved, as does the question of the possibility of individual decision-making about one's own life, and the moral, social and philosophical questions raised by the novella. Iwaszkiewicz presented various theological and philosophical views on the ontology of evil. Evil exists as a magical force embodied in the devil or demons. It is the opposite of God. The devil takes possession of weak and sinful individuals and through them proliferates his power. Evil can be the opposite of good or it can be innate to a person, but its development depends on the individual and on the social, political and ideological conditions that affect him or her. It can be a reflection of weakness and the result of manipulation, but as long as a person has free will, he or she also has the possibility of making a conscious decision to accept or reject evil (Graf 1999: 95). In addition, the novella addresses the problem of the acceptance of evil, highlighting social passivity and the toleration of evil as part of, or even an enrichment of, everyday life. It suggests several possibilities for combatting evil: firm faith and theological knowledge, perseverance, kindness, love or a moral decision.

As a metaphor for the evil concealed in the human soul and in the history of mankind (Melikowski 1997: 55), the novella *Mother Joan of the Angels* raises questions and encourages reflection, but it does not offer simple or definitive answers:

The meaning of this superb work nonetheless remains multifaceted and cannot be captured in a single form. For all its artistic excellence, this experience is served in small doses, in a form prior to final crystallisation. The final decision is thus left to the reader, but I doubt he will succeed in unravelling it. (Wyka 1968: 233, 234)

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Metafora zła. *Matka Joanna od Aniołów* Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza

STRESZCZENIE

Rozdział omawia opowiadanie pt. *Matka Joanna od Aniołów*, które Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz napisał w czasie II wojny światowej, a które w wydaniu książkowym ukazało się w Polsce w 1946 roku. Utwór koncentruje się na problemie obecności zła w człowieku, który nie jest bezpośrednio związany z wojną, ale zostaje ukazany z dystansu historycznego oraz w perspektywie filozoficznej i antropologicznej.

Iwaszkiewicz wykorzystuje wydarzenia historyczne: w pierwszej połowie XVII wieku, w klasztorze sióstr urszulanek we francuskim mieście Loudun, doszło do głośnych przypadków opętania zakonnic przez złe duchy. Miejsce akcji opowiadania przeniesione zostało do Polski, na tereny położone przy ówczesnej wschodniej granicy (Smoleńszczyzna), natomiast czas akcji to nadal wiek XVII.

Analiza czasoprzestrzeni i fabuły ujawnia głębsze warstwy znaczeniowe opowiadania, gdyż główny wątek tragedii księdza Suryna wskazuje na konflikty moralne, społeczne, religijne oraz narodowe, widoczne zarówno w zapadłej miejscowości, jak i w samych postaciach. Omówienie budowy wewnętrznej opowiadania, jak również wyeksponowanych, powtarzających się motywów oraz postaci literackich stanowi przyczynek do omówienia poruszanej w nim problematyki.

Tłumaczenie: Monika Gawlak

Metafora zla – *Mati Ivana Angelska* Jarosława Iwaszkiewicza

POVZETEK

Poglavje obravnava novelo *Mati Ivana Angelska*, ki jo je Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz napisal med drugo svetovno vojno in je v knjižni obliki na Poljskem izšla leta 1946. Delo se osredotoča na tematiko zla v človeku, ki pa ni postavljeno v kontekst vojnega dogajanja, temveč ga obravnava z zgodovinsko distanco ter s filozofskega in antropološkega vidika.

Iwaszkiewicz se je pri pisanju oprl na zgodovinsko snov: v prvi polovici 17. stoletja so se v uršulinskem samostanu v francoskem mestu Loudun pojavili nenavadni primeri obsedenosti redovnic. Dogajalni prostor je v noveli prestavljen na Poljsko, v takratno vzhodno obmejno pokrajino, dogajalni čas pa je podobno kot izhodiščni dogodek postavljen v 17. stoletje.

Analiza kronotopa in fabule osvetljuje globlje plasti novele, ki pod krovno zgodbo zunanje in notranje tragedije protagonista Surina izpostavljajo moralne, družbene, verske in nacionalne konflikte tako v zakotnem mestu kot v subjektivnosti posameznikov. Poleg tega je predstavljena zrcalno zasnovana notranja forma novele s poudarjenimi in ponavljajočimi motivi ter odprtost literarnih likov. Ob tem študija izpostavlja vprašanja in razmisleke, ki jih novela odpira.