Chapter 2:   
“Confronting Evil with Inverted Christian Narratives   
in Gor’kii’s Early Writing (1892-1902)”

“I know nothing greater, more complex, or more interesting than a person. He is everything. He created even God. Art is but one of the greatest manifestations of his creative spirit, and therefore it is just a part of a person.”  
- Gor’kii in a letter to Il’ia Repin, dated December 5, 1899[[1]](#footnote-2)

“I therefore ‘bow’ before humanity because, except for realizations of reason, imagination, conjecture, I do not feel or see anything in our world. God is the same kind of human invention as, for example, ‘photography’ with the difference that a ‘photograph’ captures what truly exists, but God is a snapshot of a person imagining himself as a being who wants to be—and maybe can be—omniscient, omnipotent, and completely just.”  
- Gor’kii in “On How I Learned to Write” (1928)[[2]](#footnote-3)

In the final decade of his life, after nearly a half-century of unparalleled success in Russia and abroad, Gor’kii reflected on his childhood and formative experiences in the essay “On How I Learned to Write” [“O *tom, kak ia uchilsia pisat’”*] (1928). There he responds to readers’ curiosity about his earliest literary influences, which included, beyond the two major nineteenth-century literary figures, Dickens and Chekhov, the Bible. Using the Christian Holy Scriptures as a pedagogical tool for literacy and grammar education was common in the theocratic Russian Empire, and thus Gor’kii’s familiarity or even admiration of the Christian scriptures could be explained and—if so desired—dismissed as a carryover from childhood. However, coming from a reputed cultural icon of the Communist Party, Gor’kii framing his own experiences through Biblical narratives indicates an ongoing interest, one that may surprise his readers. The author's anecdotes could perhaps be attributed to childish imagination and considered irrelevant to the present, if one ardently sought to make sense of them within the Party’s ideological bounds. Plausible deniability cannot explain everything, however. The most puzzling component of his essay “On How I Learned To Write” is his coda, when–apropos of nothing—the sixty-year-old writer ends his essay with a brief theological treatise on the “sacred” [*sviashchennyi*].

And if we must speak about what is “sacred,” then the sacred is a person’s discontent with himself and his desire to be better than he is; sacred is his hatred for all sorts of common nonsense he created; sacred is his desire to eliminate envy, greed, crime, illness, war, and all harm among people; and sacred is his labor.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Presumably, the quotes are referencing one or several past correspondences with fans. One is left to ponder what significance the “sacred” had for the author such that it would make him conclude his open letter to Soviet society with this impassioned non-sequitur.

Why did Gor’kii, despite his persistent rejection of the Russian Orthodox Church, Christianity, religion, and (the Christian) God more broadly, so often return to the question of the divine? A most personal statement, this essay is only one late instance of Gor’kii steering secular conversations into the realms of faith and creed. Throughout a lifetime of atheism in his Orthodox cultural context, these and other spiritual concepts consistently appealed to at least one part of him: the impulse to remake the world he inherited into one that contemporary needs for a meaningful, dignified life. He read these values into Christian narratives and linguistic artifacts and the effects of this thinking made an imprint on his writing until the end of his life. Disgust for the Russian Empire’s sociopolitical status quo built on the power of the Orthodox Church motivated Gor’kii’s desire to replace the sanctity of God once found in the traditional Russian Orthodox “sacred” with a materially and spiritually productive ethic for the masses. Offended by the failure of the Orthodox Church and its dogma to deliver sustenance, Gor’kii worked his whole life to redefine an inherited “sacred” in terms of revolutionary secular human ideals by recreating their literary embodiment, the new savior in new parables. Through his narratives Gor’kii recreated meaningful and coherent responses to the questions that religion once answered; he responded to the moral vacuum he saw in contemporary society by using the vocabulary, structures, and characters of traditional Christianity in order to replace its decadent, ineffective vestiges present in turn-of-the-century Russian society. From the beginning of this lifelong effort, Gor’kii relies on what he knows best, his reading, writing, and spiritual education—all closely interrelated—to frame his response to nearly a millennium of religious history and tradition. “If we must speak of the sacred,” Gor’kii asks and answers his own question in one fell swoop. Indeed, we must.

This chapter investigates how Gor’kii’s religious sensibilities evolved in light of his growing rejection of institutional religion. It explores how his works published between 1892 and 1904 anticipate what I call his post-Christian paradigm shift found in works written after the 1905 revolution. In order to do so, the present study builds on previous scholars’ analyses of Gor’kii’s biography with an explanation of how the individual Aleksei Maksimovich Peshkov became the public multifaceted author and thinker Maksim Gor’kii who consistently rebelled against the environment into which he was born. The writer’s formative period lasted roughly a decade, the point marked by the formation of his definitive and sufficiently expressive style that would feature so importantly in *Mother* (1906/7) and later works through the Capri period (1907-1914). I take my conclusions about this transition from his changing depictions of people both in their material being and ideal aspirations. As noted in his quote from an 1899 letter to the painter Repin, there was little more captivating to Gor’kii than humanity and its ability to think, act, and create. This chapter examines his body of work before 1905 for its contribution to discourse about the anthropocentric sociopolitical, spiritual, and ethical issues that occupied Gor’kii. The post-Christian transpositions, which reformulated Christian narratives to discuss these looming humanistic questions, in this period are rudimentary. Nonetheless, they exhibit a clear arc of philosophical and literary maturation in the young author as he attempted to break free from inherited institutional passivity to improve his and others’ future.

Approximately a dozen stories and novels written and published from 1892 to 1902 inform my observations on the psychological, ethical, and stylistic development Gor’kii underwent in his early career. I have divided his transpositions into a small number of categories: playful satires, critical reimaginations, and theological expositions. This thematic trajectory roughly maps onto the present and following two chapters. Satire of familiar Christian genres, such as that found in “About the Boy and Girl Who Didn’t Freeze to Death” [“*O mal’chike i devushke, kotorye ne zamerzli”*] (1894), “On the Rafts” [“*Na plotakh”*] (1895), and “Christmas Stories (A Christmas Story) [*Rozhdestvennye rasskazy (Rozhdestvennyi rasskaz)*] (1898), inverts Christmas and Easter stories’ motifs to contrast the traditionally uplifting messages with the historically aloof indifference of the Church. Other works like “The Girl and Death: A Story” [“*Devushka i Smert’: Skazka”*] (1892) and “Cain and Artёm” [“*Kain i Artёm”*] (1899) are jocular at times, but these works are more meaningful when viewed as critical reimaginations of a particular part of the Bible, the Book of Genesis, for Gor’kii’s circumstances. His reformulations discuss some of most fundamental human phenomena, like love, hate, and death. Finally, I examine Gor’kii’s most serious works of that time, the story “Former People” [*Byvshie liudi*] (1897) and the novels *Foma Gordeev* (1899) and *The Three* [*Troe*] (1900). These philosophical, even theological narratives became the means by which Gor’kii posited questions about in search of something to call “God” in earnest. More complex and mature in their aim, these works incorporate recognizably Biblical yet notably transformed narratives and figures as Gor’kii begins to articulate his opinions about God’s place in his world. The texts retell the Christ myth in such a way that both sets a standard for exemplariness (divinity) and embodies them in an average Russian person, hinting at the divine *narod* of future works..

In order to understand any Christian influence in his early works, this chapter examines Gor’kii’s autobiography, fiction, and personal letters for the use—particularly that with a creative license—of Christian literature broadly understood. I call the relationship between the source text (the Bible, hagiographies, Church Fathers’ writings) and Gor’kii’s texts a “transposition,” a conceptual instrument that considers the sources’ ideological and literary fabric in juxtaposition with the sociological context of the fiction works. Close reading of Gor’kii’s works supported by biblical exegesis illuminates the nuanced application and significance of each borrowed textual component. This technique of highlighting transposition components in various works builds toward a nearly complete example of a transposition, which the next chapters on Gor’kii’s godbuilding novels Mother and Confession (1908) examine in its entirety. Revisiting his early works for signs of the post-Christian paradigm shift demonstrates the increasing complexity and importance of transposing traditional Christian literature as the author came to find his own renowned style and personal convictions for the future he wanted.

*Literature Review*

A literature review on pre-1906 works demonstrates that Gor’kii’s relationship with his Christian heritage is an under-examined question, certainly for political and ideological reasons. Until the fall of the Soviet Union, published critics took Gor’kii at his word about being an atheist, ignoring the explicit references to Christian doctrine and literature in his works, not even to mention the more subtle elements.[[4]](#footnote-5) Naturally, the officially atheist Soviet critical apparatus had no interest in shining a light on the “religious impulse,” as Berry Scherr later described this tendency, of one of their most lauded, larger-than-life cultural leaders. For as long as the Communist Party controlled the image of Gor’kii through concerted propaganda and physical access to historical materials, he would be considered from an atheist, if not antitheist, point of view. Without the need to propagate a strictly atheist Gor’kii, modern scholars have begun laying down the pieces for a clear picture of his spiritual side.

Post-Soviet scholarly investigations have begun to examine Gor’kii’s allusions to Orthodoxy. However, the secular context in which those allusions appear often leads critics to miss their content and significance. Russian and Western critics alike repeatedly take issue with bringing traditional Christianity into conversations about Gor’kii. Biographers and historians are persuaded by his vocal rejection of the Church, literary scholars see allusions to Christianity only in a handful of works, and theologians are baffled by Gor’kii’s confrontations with God. They have focused on the literary-intellectual relationships between Gor’kii and Nietzsche, godbuilding theorists Bogdanov and Lunacharskii, and other thinkers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It is true that Gor’kii aligns with these other thinkers. However, as I will argue, studies on Gor’kii’s religious sensibilities fail to see the forest for the trees. Understanding the gestalt of his works’ response to religion and God requires an interdisciplinary approach toward the author’s life, works, and metaphysics.

Biographies about the writer leave the impression that Gor’kii eschewed traditional religion and the question of God more or less entirely both before and after writing *Mother*. Accounts by Pavel Basinskii (2006) and Dmitrii Bykov (2008), while thorough, restrict any mention of Christianity or any generic theism to Gor’kii’s childhood, when his grandparents compelled him to attend church, and to the aberrant period 1906-1908 when he was writing *Mother* and *Confession*. Basinskii asserts that Gor’kii ceased searching for God after his maternal grandparents died in 1887, after which no aspect of Christianity remained with the exception of those references in *Mother*.[[5]](#footnote-6) Barry Scherr (2009), too, argues there was no part of Christianity that remained with Gor’kii following his rejection of the grandparents’ “approaches to religion” and God.[[6]](#footnote-7) Even from scholars with a more capacious definition of religion and faith, like Lidiia Spiridonova in her comprehensive and insightful study *Nastoiashchii Gor’kii: Mify i real’nost’* (2013), recognition of a belief system outside historical materialism in Gor’kii is lacking. Spiridonova accurately highlights the concept of human divinity [*chelovekobozhie*] found in a handful of works, but she considers neither the early stories in which religion plays a role nor Christianity itself as a potential source for Gor’kii’s model characters, once again save *Mother*. This chapter argues that Gor’kii was relentlessly occupied with what to do with Christianity and God, even in his non-Christian ideal world. In doing so, I will argue that Gor’kii not only sought a relationship with something called “God,” he also used Christianity as a yardstick by which he could measure his replacement for Christ, who eventually became the model worker and citizen.

My approach is grounded in the conclusion that Gor’kii grew up in an Orthodox setting and thus possessed the same cultural knowledge as any bona fide true believer. For that reason, I agree with Igor’ Uriupin’s (2015) claim that Gor’kii like his contemporaries relied on the “foundation of Christian axiology” as a way to find his bearings in the novel system of meaning he was creating.[[7]](#footnote-8) My approach will expand Uriupin’s observation about a single story, “The Matter with the Clasps” [“*Delo s zastёzhkami”*] (1905) and demonstrate that Gor’kii created his image of the model post-Christian comrade with sincere consideration of the Christian savior, clearly intending to supplant it. While I will not address point-by-point scholars’ claims that philosophers like Nietzsche, Bogdanov, and Lunacharskii impacted Gor’kii’s observations about the world, my argument that Gor’kii was foremost influenced by Christian paradigms will be more comprehensive and less circumstantial than previous explanations. It is important at this juncture to note that this discussion is not about Gor’kii, Lunacharskii, and Bogdanov’s “godbuilding” philosophy per se. There are numerous existing studies about the ephemeral movement that, although Gor’kii coined the name, belonged more to Lunacharskii and Bogdanov than Gor’kii. It is undeniable that Gor’kii participated briefly in godbuilding, though this chapter seeks to establish that well before *Confession* Gor’kii had his own concept of both God and the builders. What follows is not an attempt to dissuade readers from considering Gor’kii as an influential part of the godbuilding cadre. Rather, the present argument demonstrates that Gor’kii was, above all, responding to his Christian surroundings not just with a new concept for a supreme deity but with a new paradigm to replace Christianity as a sociological foundation. I will demonstrate that, as Igor’ Uriupin claims, Gor’kii’s characters were always searching for that “divine answer” [*bozhestvennyi otvet*].[[8]](#footnote-9) In contrast to Uriupin, however, I intend to show that Gor’kii’s works depict more than the pigeonholed Christ-like barefoot wanderer [*bosiak*]. Instead, they intend to replace institutions founded on traditional Christianity with a more relatable and useful exemplar.

The scholarly arch toward asking religious questions is a part of a slow evolution out of a post-Enlightenment tradition with an analytical theoretical framework. Since at least the 1980s, Gor’kii’s Danko in “Old Woman Izergil’, “The Reader”, and other characters have been traced back to Friedrich Nietzsche.[[9]](#footnote-10) I believe this comparison only partially explains Gor’kii’s worldview for a number of reasons. A few, such as Irene Masing-Delic (1992), have supported the claim that Gor’kii’s characterization rejected more than adapted Nietzsche’s superman in favor of a divine savior, but each has neglected to say why.[[10]](#footnote-11) In summary, given the fact that Gor’kii agrees with the majority of what is available in his writings, I will show that Nietzsche’s Übermensch, while fulfilling some of Gor’kii’s spiritual needs, would not have actually prospered in the Russian author’s proposed paradigm described in his literature. First, Gor’kii’s heroes of this period live with the moral worldview that favors the collective over the individual to the point that others’ needs eclipses an individual’s freedoms. Progress toward their respective goals, vital for both Nietzsche and Gor’kii, occurs on different levels. In Gor’kii’s stories, change is discussed on a societal level, whereas the individual is Nietzsche’s focus. Second, at the same time, Gor’kii refuses to divide humanity into categories of power in order to remove any responsibility for humane treatment of individuals. Unlike Nietzsche, Gor’kii saw an inherent value in each and every person that did not need to be attained through actualization. Rather, his critique of power shone through in individual characters’ inattention to the welfare of the less powerful. Third, Gor’kii saw religious feeling, despite its failures in reality, as an inextricable aspect of human nature. This is different from praising or even approving of religion as he understood it, but it does include borrowing metaphysical elements from extant religious traditions. Gor’kii never fully divorced his own savior than the one he was taught in Church. Ultimately, as Clark and Spiridonova once hypothesized, I will prove that the author wrote his heroes into a Christian narrative, including—but not limited to—the lives of saints.[[11]](#footnote-12) The question of a new type of person propelled both Gor’kii and Nietzsche, but they went about answering that question with crucially different values and foci.

*Growing up with Grandmother, Grandfather, and God*

Aleksei Maksimovich Peshkov, who would one day adapt the pseudonym Maksim Gor’kii, was born March 28, 1868 [N.S.] to the son of an Imperial Army officer and daughter of a local businessman in the dye industry. Aleksei’s father, Maksim Savvatievich, came from the provinces around Perm’ to Nizhnii Novgorod in order to make a living. He and his wife, Varvara Vasil’evna (née Kashirina), married in October 1863, but only after the Kashirin family was convinced with the help of Aleksei’s maternal grandmother, Akulina Ivanovna, that the young man from the countryside would be a suitable husband for their youngest daughter (of ten total children). Maksim proved himself worthy and became a profitable carpenter shortly after his relocation, though he would not live long enough to find any great success. Maksim and Varvara’s first three children did not survive. The fourth born and only child to live into adulthood would be Aleksei.[[12]](#footnote-13) Like all of his relatives before him, Aleksei Maksimovich Peshkov was baptized in the Russian Orthodox faith on his fortieth day of life. He would carry that religious heritage in one form or another through all of his sixty-eight years of what would turn out to be a fascinating life.

Little is known about the Peshkovs compared to the Kashirins, and the reason for that likely comes down to location, temperament, and time in relation to Aleksei. In addition to being geographically closer to Gor’kii’s maternal family, the men of his father’s family were infamously violent. Gor’kii learned in childhood that, for example, his paternal grandfather once set dogs on his son, Gor’kii’s father, as a punishment.[[13]](#footnote-14) It is unknown if this event occurred before or after Savvatii Peshkov received the equivalent of a dishonorable discharge from the army after getting into a quarrel with his subordinates. In any case, it is clear from what little we do know about that side of the family that it was not an environment conducive to raising children. Another significant reason for the knowledge gap is that Gor’kii never got to know his father personally. In 1871 Maksim Savvat’evich died after a lengthy battle with cholera, which was originally contracted from his three-year-old son, Aleksei. From Gor’kii’s retelling of his childhood, we may assume that Maksim Savvat’evich was not like his own father at all, which allowed him to marry into the respected Kashirin family in the first place. Particularly after the death of his father, the young Aleksei was raised by the Kashirins until the age of 12, when he was sent away to earn his own living “amongst the people” [*V liudiakh*, the second of his autobiographical trilogy], having completed only four years of schooling.[[14]](#footnote-15) As a consequence, his maternal grandmother and grandfather, who were also his godparents, exerted the most significant influence on the child. However, there remains much to investigate about the role that the Peshkovs played in his life. As an adult, despite lofty ideals of love akin to his grandmother, Gor’kii exhibits a destructive force deeply reminiscent of his paternal grandfather. Within Gor’kii two contradictory bloodlines and two conflicting worlds were born and would follow him throughout his career.

As his godparents, the Kashirins were responsible for Aleksei’s spiritual education, and they took that charge seriously. The boy ended up in their household after his father’s passing from cholera and his mother’s subsequent estrangement from the lone child. Seemingly unable to cope with the responsibility, Varvara abdicated her responsibilities and left her son to her parents to raise. The godparents’ took widely differing approaches to instilling Aleksei with the values they found most important. In his godmother, Akulina Ivanova, he found the mercy and forgiveness emphasized in the New Testament.[[15]](#footnote-16) His godfather, Vasilii Vasillievich, taught him, on the other hand, the authority, laws, and enforcement embodied in the God of the Old Testament.[[16]](#footnote-17) I am not the first to make such distinctions. Both Scherr and Basinskii have already noted the disparate impressions of God provided by each Gor’kii’s maternal grandmother and grandfather. I join Barry Scherr in explaining young Aleksei’s interactions with his grandparents as spiritually significant, but I disagree with his claim that Gor’kii rejected both his grandmother and grandfather’s approaches to religion.[[17]](#footnote-18) Rather, in support of Lidiia Spiridonova’s hypothesis of inclusion, I show how each grandparent’s philosophies would become part of Aleksei’s and thus Gor’kii’s future religious sensibilities.[[18]](#footnote-19) In fact, as fate would have it, Aleksei may have never become Gor’kii if not for these particular individuals as godparents.

What came to form his sense of discipline Gor’kii saw first in Vasilii Vasilievich’s unrelenting observance of Orthodox tradition. Until his death, the grandfather represented to young Gor’kii the lawful order of experience and the brutality that would punish transgressors. More than once does Gor’kii remark on Kashirin’s authoritarian approach to God and religious education. Consider, for example, a recollection in *Childhood*, in which Vasilii Vasilievich compares the young Gor’kii himself characters from an Old Testament story.

Quickly I was already reading the Psalter about the warehouses; usually we did this after evening tea, and each time I was supposed to finish reading the psalm.

"Bee, ell, eh, bleh; ess, ess, bless; ed, blessed,” I spat out, dragging my finger across the page, and out of boredom I asked,   
“Blessed is the man, is that uncle Iakov?”  
“How about I crack you on the back of your head and you’ll find out which man is blessed,” grandfather said angrily snorting, but I felt that he was angry just out of habit, for order. And I was almost never wrong: after a minute, apparently having forgotten about me, he grumbled,   
“W-yeah, playing and singing he’s King David, but when it comes to business, he’s poisoned by Absalom.”[[19]](#footnote-20)

Absalom, a figure of rabbinic literature more often than Christian literature, appears in verses 13 through 18 of the Second Book of Samuel, often titled in the West as “Kingdoms” or “Kings”. The young prince is most popularly known for murdering his sister’s sexual assailant before rebelling against his father, King David, an act that quickly resulted in his death. Rather than a death of retribution, however, 2 Samuel tells the story of a death of propriety, for it was David’s soldiers who, disobeying orders and acting upon their own sense of justice, killed Absalom. This quote, a transposition of Biblical narrative itself, attributed to Vasilii Vasilevich offers insight into the lessons of moral authority Gor’kii learned from Christianity as embodied by his grandfather and the God of the Old Testament. Several years after the fact, Gor’kii connects all at once in this passage the literary utility of the Bible, his zealous and aggressive grandfather, and the authority found within both sources.

Aleksei’s practice reading, though mentioned only briefly, also offers important information about Gor’kii’s understanding of religion. The Book of Psalms played a highly influential role in the formation of Gor’kii’s literary and spiritual education, as seen in his reference to the verses even in the excerpt from his 1928 statement above. Quotes from the Psalter appear throughout Gor’kii’s works, but no single part of the book or perhaps even of the entire Bible appears more commonly than the words he quotes here. Sounding out the letters of the first word, Aleksei reads “Blessed is the man,” the initial words (just two in Russian: бла́жен муж [*blázhen muzh*]) of Psalms 1:1 and a symbolic phrase for Gor'kii. The Psalter is undoubtedly connected to Vasilii Vasilevich for the boy Aleksei and later the writer Gor’kii, for it was his grandfather who drilled the Psalms with him, particularly the first verse. The text itself holds significance as well. The full sentence (spanning Ps. 1:1-2) reads “Blessed is the man, who does not seek the counsel of the dishonest, does not stand on the path of sinners and does not sit in the company of those who corrupt, but whose will is in the law of the Lord and about the Lord’s law ponders day and night!”[[20]](#footnote-21) The meaning of Psalms 1 is in defining moral righteousness by the nature of thought, will, and action. Blessed are the obedient, those who are not “like dust that can be swept by the wind from the face of the Earth,” explains Psalms 1:4. For Vasilii Vasilevich, this obedience likely recognized God above all others, but in the context of teaching Aleksei to read, the imminent authority was ultimately himself. Disobedience, even in the form of a naive question, invited punishment.[[21]](#footnote-22) For Aleksei and eventually Gor’kii, Psalm 1 set the precedent for dividing people into moral and immoral, and Vasilii Vasilevich, the precedent for making that morality one’s own.

What good Gor’kii would come to see in humanity was primarily observed in the God that his grandmother, Akulina Ivanovna, described in their conversations. In contrast to the punitive God of the Old Testament, the grandmother’s God was the Christ of the New Testament. Readers alongside Aleksei can observe the grandmother’s affinity toward the merciful and intimately familiar God in her prayers as well as her indirect descriptions found within wistful stories and wandering melodic conversations with the deity. Akulina, unlike Vasilii, actually prays to Christ in particular when she asks for divine protection.[[22]](#footnote-23) The grandfather, when actually heard praying, never mentions Christ by name, but instead always addresses God the Father. More than just to whom his grandparents pray, young Aleksei notices in his grandmother’s words and actions that God is more than a source of law and order. In a way, the boy comes to see God as a friend, both for the emotional support and as someone not too dissimilar to Aleksei himself.

This relationship between Aleksei and a kind God takes form after an episode of childish indiscretion that Gor’kii describes in Chapter 7 of *Childhood*. He begins saying that he “very early on understood that grandfather had one God, but grandmother had another.”[[23]](#footnote-24) His path to understanding his grandmother’s concept of God began with his decision to take revenge on his grandparents’ neighbor, who, having picked a fight with first Vasilii Vasil’evich, involved Akulina Ivanovna in the quarrel with verbal insults and a projectile carrot launched in her direction. Aleksei stalked and waited for the tavern owner to descend into her cellar to grab something, at which point he locked her in the underground room, danced triumphantly on the door, and literally threw away the key onto a nearby roof. However, Akulina, in spite of her personal feelings, marched Aleksei back to the neighbors’ residence to retrieve the key and liberate his prisoner of war.[[24]](#footnote-25) The incident ended with laughter from both the grandmother and neighbor, perplexing Aleksei and upsetting his righteous vindictiveness likely learned from Vasilii Vasil’evich. Instead, Akulina Ivanovna creates out of this chaos a lesson in knowing God. Despite what may seem black-and-white, she explains, not even God can always answer who is more righteous among the fallen and sinful adults who wage such petty conflicts. What God feels most of all, according to the grandmother, is sorrow and pity for those who engage in such senseless matters. After her brief homily, Akulina Ivanovna goes to the corner to pray with eyes full of tears, presumably for her grandson and godson, having sinned in her name.

One piece of their conversation sticks out more than others, namely the question that Aleksei poses to his grandmother: “Does God really not know everything?” Her reply, if we are to believe historical actuality conveyed in the autobiographical novel, had permanent and resounding effects on Gor’kii, his career, and the worldview behind his writings. She says to Aleksei:

“If [God] did know everything, then people likely would not be doing so much. He, hope oh Father, is looking from Heaven onto the Earth, on all of us, and at another minute how he will cry, how he will weep: ‘You are my people, my people, my dear people. Oh, how sorry I am for you.’”.[[25]](#footnote-26)

Her—rather heretical—response left its imprint on her grandson’s spirituality. It very well could be the primary reason for Gor’kii’s resilient theism, albeit unusual. The grandmother’s focus on the fallible humanity of God and Christ disrupted the image of God as an authoritarian enforcer of anachronistic laws. The shift brought the divine much closer to Aleksei’s intellectual and emotional, or, "From that moment, her God became even closer and clearer to [him],” as Gor’kii himself says.[[26]](#footnote-27) This watershed moment for Aleksei and Gor’kii’s religious thinking could also provide further evidence for Mikhail Agurskii’s claim that “Gor’kii’s religious thinking can be understood only within the framework of Christian heretical thought.”[[27]](#footnote-28) However, this origin story would go much further back in Gor’kii’s development than the author’s exploration of modernist philosophy in the 1900s.

We know from repeated renunciations of Russian Orthodoxy that the author decidedly rejected the traditional institutions underpinning both grandparents’ religious sensibilities. His motivation to oppose the Church and its traditions is one question that deserves careful consideration. It is worth briefly mentioning beforehand that young Aleksei walked away from the Orthodox Church with a wealth of knowledge about its texts, rituals, and history. Later in life, that knowledge would inform his anti-institutional views and themes found in stories and novels. In childhood, however, his religious education extended beyond stories from his grandparents. Interactions with the priests in the local Church-run school show that Aleksei possessed a deep knowledge of Christian literature, including the Bible, hagiographies, and church writings. Gor’kii recalls an exchange with Bishop Khrisanf in the schoolyard shortly after learning the headmaster intended to expel young Aleksei for poor behavior. The story retells their brief conversation like that of the manna from heaven. Khrisanf was so impressed with Aleksei’s knowledge of the Sacred History [*Sviashchennaia istoriia*] (despite not having read it), the Psalter and other parts of the Bible, and saints’ lives like that of Saint Alexius of Rome (known as *Aleksei, chelovek bozhii* in Russian) that he stayed the boy’s expulsion from school. This successful test also inspired Aleksei to go out and buy Sacred History, the authoritative history of the Old and New Testaments and the prophecy of a Christian Savior. In order to do so, however, Aleksei stole a ruble that his mother had been using as a bookmark. When he realized that he could buy not just the Sacred History but also a copy of Robinson Crusoe with that ruble, he could not help but take the money despite the consequences. One may extrapolate from both of these anecdotes that—unsurprisingly—Gor’kii always approached the Christian literary tradition just like Robinson Crusoe or any other fiction literature, and, while he clearly had some interest piqued by the supernatural elements, it was the artistic and narrative elements of traditional religious literature that most attracted the secular author.

The remainder of this chapter shows why Gor’kii disavowed the Church’s cultural heritage despite the time and effort spent learning it extensively and in detail. It would be difficult to prove that there is a single reason behind this decision, but I believe there is reason to elevate one primary motivating factor above the rest. More than anything else Gor’kii struggled with theodicy, or the justification of God’s existence, particularly as a response to the problem of evil found around him. If God is good, as Christianity teaches, the permission of heinous acts against humanity under God’s observation presented Gor’kii with a puzzle he was never able to entirely solve. This nagging unanswered question permeates works written throughout at least the first half of his career, but the desire to find an explanation is particularly raw and piquant in the first decade of stories, novels, and plays. As he approaches 1905, the issue increasingly vexes Gor’kii as he continues to witness the impending humanitarian crisis described in the previous chapter. As I will argue, only at that point does Gor’kii truly gives up on the God and religion given to him by tradition. Until that time, he worked diligently to reconcile his knowledge of Christianity with the bleak world around him, which we will see in the nearly dozen works included in the following discussion. Gor’kii must try all available options before he can finally find within himself and others the capacity—and necessity—to make the world anew.

*The First Transpositions*

The period before 1905 can be divided into two phases based on the complexity of Gor’kii’s transpositions and his approach to the theodicean question. Initially, his rudimentary adaptations reexamine common foundational narratives from Genesis, which is followed by a more idiosyncratic and philosophical conversation about the state of humanity. At the pivot between these two phases is fittingly Gor’kii’s “Cain and Artёm” (1899). Using the story of Cain and Abel from Genesis 4 as a template, the story grapples with human self-interested apathy and inaction, which Gor’kii sees as an unforgivable, mortal sin above everything else. It is also important to note that with time these narratives transition from generalized social commentary to discussing Gor’kii’s contemporary Russia. The primary tension within Gor’kii’s worldview during this period is Christ’s increasing estrangement from life in turn-of-the-twentieth-century Russia.

The first phase in Gor’kii’s experimentation with Christian narratives lasted from 1892, when he published his first work, through approximately 1898 and is characterized by obvious, at times clumsily conspicuous, references to prominent Biblical figures and motifs. They are more “transplants” than “transpositions” at this stage. In this span of time, one can see Gor’kii’s early writing was a period of artistic exploration and experimentation as he took from his literary knowledge and attempted to create his own style. Regarding the use of Christian themes and characters, these early stories feature Biblical elements taken directly and literally, without much intervention from the author. Gor’kii’s go-to device was a simple inversion of expectations associated with the scenes and characters he copied from the original. Put another way, Gor’kii uses religious literary sources in a cut-and-paste manner and then changes them so that they are the binary opposite of their original purpose. This device is found in his works through 1898 and will be the subject of my analysis in this first phase. I will use examples from his early works, including “The Girl and Death” (1892), “The Matter with the Clasps” (1895), the so-called Easter story “On the Raft: An Easter Story” (1895), and the so-called Christmas stories “On the Boy and Girl Who Didn’t Freeze to Death” (1894) and “Christmas Stories (A Christmas Story)” (1898), to illustrate Gor’kii’s first attempts at these inversions. As time progresses, his treatment becomes increasingly nuanced and progresses into complexly crafted transpositions.

## “The Girl and Death”

The fairytale verses of “The Girl and Death” (herein “GD”) were written in Tbilisi in September of 1892 shortly after Gor’kii finished his first published work “Makar Chudra.” It was not until 1917, however, that he could publish this story of a young girl meeting death in both literal and figurative ways.[[28]](#footnote-29) The most likely explanation for the government’s censorship of GD is the role of the tsar in one of the two levels of this frame story. The outer frame depicts a tsar racing back to his fortress from battle to re-enlist more soldiers for his war, as he was left with none after defeat. The ruler’s sprint is interrupted by a young couple, whose apathy toward matters of war enrages the tsar. Already frustrated with his previous losses, he uses his cavalry to stampede and kill the girl. From there, readers are transported to a world in which a personified Death lives on Earth and kills those whose time has come or even “sometimes, when angry, Death wipes out even those who need not have been.”[[29]](#footnote-30) The girl, Love [*Liubov’*], through the remainder of the story convinces Death to allow her live while inspiring Death to “build joys for Love and happiness for Life.” That is to say, to become productive rather than destructive for humanity. Here Gor’kii entangles the fundamental signposts of contemporary culture, particularly as a Christian following the sacraments: birth, marriage, and death. Gor’kii puts them in conversation with his sources understanding them, the Judeo-Christian story of Genesis and the Christian archetype of transgression, Judas Iscariot, to make his message.

The story is divided into seven parts and, as mentioned, features multiple levels of storytelling. The topmost frame, in which the girl is killed by the tsar, plays out in the first section. The remainder of the parts happen in Love’s psychology using Gor’kii’s metaphysics of life, death, good, and evil. Of those sections, one takes place in Death’s mid-morning dream. Part IV of GD describes Death’s nightmarish visions of God and the Archangel Michael deciding the fates of Cain and Judas, who dangle over a swamp of fire. The two, themselves the parent and child of Death, are precisely the representations of evil and sin that anyone familiar with traditional readings of the Christian Bible would expect. In fact, Gor’kii here is writing what may be considered a continuation of the relevant Biblical narratives, and to do so he uses God, Michael, Cain, and Judas as they appeared in the original stories. The Archangel Michael guards the gates of heaven, deciding who may enter, and the two humans acknowledge and repent for their sins to the angel. Unconvinced, Michael denies them entrance, causing the sorrowful pair to ask for God directly: “Michael! Let the Lord say at least one word to us, even if he will regret it; after all, we are no longer asking for forgiveness!” At this point, we can see the first instances of a major device in early Gor’kii, the secularized inversion of Christian narratives and morality. In Death’s dream, God, responding only to the angel’s third request, denies even speaking to his creations, ignoring their pleas. As Cain and Judas are cast into the flames, Death wakes up from its nap, and the gruesome tale is over. Nonetheless, the inhumanity of God’s rejection leaves an impression on Death and the reader.

Cain, the original murderer, and Judas Iscariot, traitor to God, are portrayed in traditional Christianity as morally and spiritually bankrupt, acting against the interest of God and humanity. In GD, Gor’kii’s earliest transpositions challenge the original narratives by shining a light on God’s lack of forgiveness and the sinner’s capacity for redemption. Refusal to even speak with Cain and Judas allows Michael to hastily cast them into the fiery underworld, and the reader is made, even if just for a second, to empathize with the arch sinners’ vulnerability before authority. Gor’kii hopes we will correlate God’s casual violence with the tsar. To further his point, however, the God of Death’s dream explains the circumstances which not he but another may forgive Cain and Judas. “As long as Death kills the living, / Cain and Judas have no forgiveness. / Let them be forgiven by the one whose power can / overcome the force of Death forever.”[[30]](#footnote-31) The end of the GD reveals that Love can redirect Death’s penchant for destruction into a creative, life-affirming force. Love, an influential but otherwise unremarkable girl, plays the role of Christ, who is traditionally the one who can overcome death in Christian salvation rhetoric. The story demystifies and humanizes the standard Christian approach to major moments in life. Gor’kii simultaneously criticizes institutional religion and unchecked state power with this brief story, and he was able to do so adeptly because he used established representatives from the Christian literary tradition in a way to represent contemporary issues.

*Transpositions of Popular Christian Literature: Christmas Stories*

There are few stories more integral to the Christian tradition than those underlying the important holidays of Christmas and Easter. The authoritative accounts of these highest of Holy Days circulated through the Church and were important in the proselytization of heathens and consequential growth of Christianity. These narratives became so dominant and influential in the religion that they became genres in the secular literary world. By the time that Gor’kii’s Christmas stories [*rozhdestvenskii* or *sviatochnyi rasskaz*] appeared in the 1890s, Russian readers were well aware of the type of plot that is to be expected from such a story. Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol in Prose, Being a Ghost Story of Christmas* [*Rozhdestvennaia pesn’: sviatochnyi rasskaz s privideniiami*] (1843) made a particular impact on public perceptions of Christmas. Gor’kii mentions his admiration for the English author’s work on multiple occasions, such as in “On How I Learned to Write.” Fёdor Dostoevskii also published a widely read Christmas story in 1876 entitled “The Beggar Boy at Christ’s Christmas Tree” [“*Mal’chik u Khrista na ёlke*”]. The stories share the central figure of a panhandling, malnourished boy unable to keep warm and fed around Christmas time. Holiday expectations of joy in both works highlights the neediness of some parts of society, just as the pregnant Mary and her husband Joseph were helpless, as well, according to the Nativity narrative. The juxtaposition of society’s poorest and most defenseless, particularly children, with the holiday’s humanistic spirit of giving strikes a prominent chord in these and other Christmas stories, though with varying tones and outcomes. For that reason, freezing and starving children became the subject of Gor’kii’s own Christmas tales, his next polemics against the Russian Orthodox Church.

“On the Boy and Girl Who Did Not Freeze to Death” and “Christmas Stories (A Christmas Story)” were published in 1894 and 1898, respectively. The stories represent Gor’kii’s attempt at a story to join the growing movement of narratives around the holiday. As one may predict, however, they do not have much in common with the others other than the title. I introduce these stories together not just because they belong to the same style, but also because, as I will argue, they are actually two parts of the same story arch within the same diegetic universe. They share a similar self-aware tone from the narrator, a writer with a novel approach to the traditional story form. Most importantly, the latter story provides a conclusion to the unresolved first, in which the narrator addresses not just the individual stories leading the genre, but the larger culture meaning with sociopolitical implications behind the literature. Gor’kii uses these stories as an opportunity to explore a novel literary style. However, the Christmas story becomes, more than anything for Gor’kii, a vehicle for subverting a cultural paradigm by exposing the rotten foundation on which it was built, the authority of the Church to stop suffering. Gor’kii adopts the religious theme in order to critique the very idea behind it.

Gor’kii commences his questioning of the Christmas story tradition with a straightforward address to the reader at the beginning of “On the Boy and Girl Who Did Not Freeze to Death” (1894). Acknowledging what he saw as the expected plot of a standard Christmas story, the story’s narrator immediately announces his departure from what is expected of him. “In Christmas stories it has been long accepted to annually freeze a few poor boys and girls,” he begins. “A boy or a girl of a proper Christmas story usually stands in front of some kind of large home, admiring through the glass a Christmas tree, glowing in elegant rooms, and then freezes, having felt a great deal unpleasant and bitter things.”[[31]](#footnote-32) Immediately it is apparent that this is not another regular holiday tale. His intentions, however, are less expected. From the beginning, the narrator makes explicit his aim to avoid using the destitute to “remind wealthy children about their existence.” The conscious focus on socioeconomic status separates Gor’kii’s work from others from the outset. This narrator, “despite [other authors’] cruel approach toward their characters,” wishes to tell of the boy and girl who did not freeze to death instead because how “awkward it is to kill one living creature for another.” From the outset of the first story, the narrator vocally advocates for the dignity of the characters, in the form of a person, that are central to his message.

The young boy and girl of Gor’kii’s 1894 so-called Christmas story survive to the end, as the title promises, but the character’s lives do not end there according to the first of two halves of the adaptation. That said, the ending presents more questions than answers about the role of the children at the center of “On the Boy and Girl Who Did Not Freeze to Death.” Gor’kii wished to break norms by contravening expectations and addressing the audience directly. For better or worse, a character still living after the end of a narrative invites interest and speculation into the characters’ fate. Gor’kii himself hinted at such an idea when he ended his first Christmas story with such ambiguity: “In my opinion,” he wraps up, “it is extremely absurd to freeze children who have the legitimate possibility of dying in a simpler and more natural way.”[[32]](#footnote-33) Here the author speaks through the narrator to remind readers that the cold and hungry children nevertheless have real needs to be met if they are going to persist beyond the chronological end of the story. Their natural and inconspicuous deaths are foreshadowed in the final words of the story. The uncertain circumstances under which they finish their meal and time in the story’s plot lead to doubt as to whether these orphans will live to see a day in urban Russia with a reliable meal and place to sleep.

The title “Christmas Stories (A Christmas Story)” conveys a straightforward approach similar to “On a Boy and Girl Who Did Not Freeze to Death,” but the story itself is deceptively complex. The narrator has finished another Christmas story and is admittedly tired of the style already shortly after its beginning. We hear about the characters of the newest work: another couple of beggars, an elderly man and his wife, who follow the legacy of the boy and girl from Gor’kii’s previous Christmas story. In addition to sharing the life of pleading for food and money on the street, each of the younger and older pairs of are described as a two animate “rag heaps” that move throughout the snowy city asking for charity and hiding from civilization when possible. The older couple’s life, however, can no longer rely on the pity that children elicit, and a life on the streets have weakened the destitute man and woman. Gor’kii describes their lot in life: “people, beaten down by life, timid, meek, and half-alive.”[[33]](#footnote-34) Not long after the story begins, the couple dies on their way to morning service while outside the church. As he is succumbing to the elements, the old man sees Christ, who does nothing but smile while the beggar slowly slips into unconsciousness. Readers are then transported out of the lower frame to the one of the narrator, who begins to ponder the meaning of his and all other Christmas stories similar to his. The night after finishing the story of the elderly beggars, the writer is visited by ghostly figures and a voice, nods to Dickens’ classic. “Christmas Stories” highlights the cultural paradox of Christmas paupers: if celebrating the birth of Christ is a joyous occasion, why do authors sentence their characters, often children, to life and death on the cold streets of Europe and Russia?

Instead of interrogating the moral shortcomings of an individual like Scrooge in Dickens’ novella, the incorporeal voice in “Christmas Stories” brings to the forefront apathy among the middle and wealthy classes toward those below them. This manifestation of Gor’kii’s struggle with theodicy brings into question the real meaning of “Christmas” in the title of this story and others. Gor’kii starts by referencing a less popular side of the Biblical nativity story. Questioned about his purposes, the author declares his belief in his stories’ capacity for sowing sympathy among readers, causing the ghosts of frozen children in the room laugh at his naïveté.[[34]](#footnote-35) The voice then adds: “And if you would have frozen all poor children on this Earth in one of your stories, you would have inflicted these readers of yours with only pleasure.” The writer’s audience, he continues, “may have called you Herod as a joke, but they likely would have sighed at the thought that your story is just a fantasy.”[[35]](#footnote-36) King Herod ruled the State of Judea under Roman direction for over thirty years until approximately 1 BCE and the kingdom’s dissolution. Accounts of him appear in the Gospels and Book of Acts, and he is above all known for the “Massacre of the Innocents” [*izbienie mladentsev*]: frustrated that the magi lied to him about where exactly the Jewish Messiah had been born, Herod ordered all male children under two years of age in Bethlehem to be killed.[[36]](#footnote-37) Gor’kii’s author like King Herod was responsible for the death of innocent children. This joke, albeit a momentary ribald comment, contains a wealth of implications about Gor’kii’s message. The writer in the story, standing in for Dostoevskii, Dickens, and all others participating in the Christmas tradition, is compared to Herod, whose malicious jealousy of the Christian savior lead him to kill all local male children in an attempt to guard his power. However, this joke is targeted at the religious public more than anything, and it draws in close together the expectations of religious narratives and the pleasure they engender in their faithful readers. What Christianity teaches, Gor’kii implies, is the opportunity to ignore the reality of death and violence with the reasoning that there is something better waiting for the children Herod and authors had killed then and now.

In “Christmas Stories,” Gor’kii describes writers as the prophets of their day. This attitude is most visible when the voice questions the writer’s ability to change the public’s capacity for empathy. The voice in the narrator’s dream directs readers’ attention toward the contradictory form and message in religious holiday stories.

When reality does not touch people and does not offend people with its harsh torment and baseness, is it your fantasies that will ennoble a person? Will it be you who awakens the heart within them, telling him about those who are freezing, dying from hunger, about all of life’s gloomy aspects, to which all kinds of people close their eyes looking for peace and contentment in their life, muffling their conscious by handing out pennies? .... And you hope?![[37]](#footnote-38)

Speaking through the ghastly voice, Gor’kii explains the reason for the continuation of death and suffering is not for lack of awareness but of concern and sympathy. Writers are not the prophets that they wish to be, a conclusion Gor’kii comes to when faced with the aloofness in those around him. “Can it be true that the stories of miraculous birth and overcoming death have deafened people to the gloomy reality around us,” he seems to ask himself. It is the power of narratives in religion and other institutions that enable people to construct their own lives and even entire universes, a fact that Gor’kii leverages heavily in his later works. In “Christmas Stories,” the crestfallen narrator wakes from sleep and, still tormented by the unanswered questions from his dream, he rips up the story he just finished, allowing the children he created earlier to live to old age on the cold streets, but, for better or worse, alive nonetheless.

## Transpositions of Popular Christian Literature: Easter Story

The Easter story was another stylistic adaptation Gor’kii published in this early developmental period. Unlike its Christmas-themed predecessors, the Easter story did not have a consistent plot arc and structure in Gor’kii’s time. Rather, as Ivan Esaulov argues in *Easter in Russian Literature* [*Paskhalnost’ russkoi slovesnosti*] (2004), the most important holiday in Russian Orthodoxy has long taken various forms and played different roles in literary history, perhaps from the earliest of Russian written culture.[[38]](#footnote-39) For Gor’kii, a recent reference for Easter stories could have been Aleksandr Khomiakov’s Russified remake of Dicken’s *A Christmas Carol* into the *Christ’s Bright Resurrection* (1844); any of a number of works by Dostoevskii, including *Humiliated and Insulted* (1861) or *Crime and Punishment* (1866); Nikolai Shchedrin’s “Christ’s Night” (1876); or “The Figure” (1889) by Nikolai Leskov. V.N. Zakharov, whom Esaulov cites, mentions all of these as examples in his article “The Easter Story as a Genre of Russian Literature” while outlining a definition of the Easter tale.[[39]](#footnote-40) The resurrection motif is integral to the Easter style, though it is employed throughout works more broadly as a fundamental change undergone by characters, particularly one that brings them into a more open and honest union with another person or other people. The story of the resurrection seeks to reunite what has been broken apart: Christ’s human and divine natures, a murderer and his victim’s souls, or a saint and her living child, for example. However, no scholar situates Gor’kii’s “On a Raft” (1895) within the Easter tale genre tradition until now.

The reason for that lapse in analysis is clear; had Gor’kii not called it an “Easter story” in the subtitle, it is unlikely that anyone would have viewed at it as such. Christianity is the object of derision, like in previous stories, and the plot features none of the traditional elements transposed directly he included in the Christmas stories. Therefore, “On a Raft” is, if anything, just another anti-Christian story by Gor’kii. However, there is meaning in the subtitle. The author curiously changed it after the story’s completion, until which it had been “A Picture” [*Kartina*].[[40]](#footnote-41) By calling it an “Easter tale,” Gor’kii aims his critical gaze directly at the most important story within Christianity, the narrative that affirms millennia of prophecies about the transformative mystery of the savior figure and the divinity of the God the Trinity. Without the resurrection, Christ is only human and his miracles are deceptions. For that reason, my analysis of “On a Raft” centers around the genre’s intention of depicting transfiguration that Gor'kii leveraged to confront Christian dogma. If his message was that religion still has the power to effect deep-rooted moral improvement in a person, characters' transformation should be evident. If, on the other hand, Gor’kii is seeking to undermine the moral authority of the Church and Christianity as righteous arbiters of good and evil, as we may well expect, then personal refinement, if there is any, will be weak and to the detriment of believers. The added layer of an Easter story genre allows Gor’kii to juxtapose and criticize what is present with what is absent from the tale of Christ’s resurrection.

The short story “On a Raft” develops primarily through the gradual disclosure of characters’ lives in the course of their conversation. Floating down a river just before daybreak on a cold, foggy spring morning, Mitrii and Sergei beside each other on a raft while propelling it with oars. Mitrii, the boat owner’s son, is a “light-haired, frail, and thoughtful guy of about twenty” who only speaks in a whisper.[[41]](#footnote-42) His rowing partner, Sergei, is “a worker, a gloomy and healthy fellow.” From the front of the raft, Mitrii’s father, Silan Petrov, screams orders and insults like a foghorn to keep their eyes on their murky surroundings and stay on course. The boat is surrounded on all sides by a thick curtain of gray clouds while floating on “a river [that] seemed like a bottomless abyss surrounded on all sides by mountains that reached the sky and dressed in fog,” so much that those in the back of the raft cannot see the front and vice-versa.[[42]](#footnote-43) The imagery of characters forced to look at themselves suggests the characters are setting out on a soul-searching journey. As they move, Sergei’s teasing brings to light the central conflict: Mitrii, deeply pious and wanting to live a chaste life, recently called off his wedding out of fear and guilt, thereby spoiling his father’s efforts to find him a wife. Since the change in plans, Silan, who is standing on the other end of the raft the whole time, took his son’s fiancée as his own lover. She stands by his side on their vessel. Though their relationship is ethically fraught, Silan continues with the affair, as it does not explicitly violate any laws or commandments. The story’s exposition provides for multiple possible transformations among the main characters.

That said, Gor’kii’s focus increasingly centers on the spiritual young man. Mitrii attempts to justify his decisions to Sergei between the deafening commands from the front of the raft. First, the choice to call off the wedding was the result of Mitrii’s meekness, which left him unable to stand up for himself and voice his desires to his father. In his conversations with Sergei he recalls, “And I told her, ‘I cannot marry you, Mar’ia. You are a healthy maiden, I am a sick, frail man. And I did not want to marry at all, but father, you know, forced me, “Marry,” he said, “and that’s that!”’”[[43]](#footnote-44) Sergei responds by mocking his lack of sexual desire, saying that he forced Silan into the sin of *snokhachestvo*, the unspoken practice in rural parts of the Russian Empire of wealthy patriarchs forcing their daughters-in-law, or *snokha*, into a sexual relationship.[[44]](#footnote-45) When Sergei asks Mitrii what other laws he has broken, the demure Christian responds with divine law, known to everyone familiar with their soul, “one law for all: do not do that which is against your soul, and you will do no harm to anyone on Earth.”[[45]](#footnote-46) By “soul” he explicitly means God. His reformulation of Christ’s Great Commandments [Commandments of Love in Russian, *Zapovedi liubvi*, Mt. 22:37-40 and Mk. 12:28-31] shapes Gor’kii’s polemic with Christian doctrine in this story. Despite what he said, Mitrii’s choice to follow his soul did indeed bring harm, for his abandoned fiancée fled to Silan out of fear of social ostracization. His choice to leave Mar’ia also brought additional shame and weakness to Mitrii himself as he tries to deal with past deceptions. However, before his speech is done, Mitrii is interrupted by Silan’s thundering commands: “Hey, you! Sleepy demons! Keep your eyes out!” [*Ei, vy! Deimony sonnye! Gliadi v oba!*] amid the opaque foggy river way.[[46]](#footnote-47) Finally unable to stand any more criticism, shortly after Mitrii eventually yells, though still in a whisper, at his interlocutor while threatening suicide. His muffled pleas for mercy fade out to inaudible protest: “You are cruel people! I’m leaving. Leaving forever... I don’t have it in me...”, to which Sergei responds, “Yes, go away!..", and silence takes over the raft and its environs.[[47]](#footnote-48) Animosity removes the devout Mitrii from the picture entirely.

The second part of the story begins symbolically: the early morning’s gray fog gives way to day, and the clouds part to reveal a clear sky and path ahead. Whether Mitrii truly died due to suicide in the story is debatable, though there is reason to believe Gor’kii did mean some version of death to parallel the Christ story. The beginning of part II depicts a lively, robust Silan with Mar’ia in his arms while they watch the water flow past. The couple has a romantic moment as he kisses her, and immediately after roosters are heard crowing in the background. This scene, though only a handful of lines, demonstrates Gor’kii’s effort to connect it to the Bible. In each of the Gospel accounts, Judas Iscariot kisses Christ to mark him for arrest by the Romans shortly, and the Apostle Peter denies that he knows Jesus on three separate instances, the final time being marked by the crow of a rooster.[[48]](#footnote-49) As they lead to the death of Christ, so with these two strong symbols of betrayal Gor’kii transposes the Easter death element onto Mitrii. That being true, readers expect the triumphant return of our hero. Instead, the golden rays of the day’s sun begin to shine down on Silan and his *snokha* while they discuss possible scenarios of Mitrii’s death to their pleasure. Mar’ia even “prayerfully” wishes for him a swift death.[[49]](#footnote-50) The inverted transposition of popular and meaningful parables from Christian literature once again characterizes the early stages of Gor’kii’s portrayal of religion and evil. Instead of the believer Mitrii, impotent and hypocritical regardless, the unrepentant antagonists arrive to a lush, vibrant land where “the juicy scent of earth, newly sprouted grass, and resinous aroma of pine needles” waft in the air.[[50]](#footnote-51) Enlivened by the surroundings, Silan once again yells “Keep a look out, guys!" and they continue on their way without Mitrii, almost to say that the bright future promised by resurrection is, in fact, brighter without it. Gor’kii’s continued use of anti-savior narratives signals a deepening uncertainty that good exists at all.

## Cain as the Good Samaritan in “Cain and Artem”

“Cain and Artem” (1899), marks a turning point in Gor’kii’s treatment of Christian ethics. This tale of a Jewish merchant and a Russian thug features a recognizable inverted paradigm as in earlier stories. However, as Pavel Basinskii also notes, it is decidedly more complex than previous stories, including “On a Raft.”[[51]](#footnote-52) This character study is remarkable for its aim to construct types founded on the theodicy question, and in doing so, foretelling the personal complexity of future pieces by Gor’kii. Like the previous examples, this story interrogates people’s amorality, but like the works after it, “Cain and Artem” asks its questions in a decidedly Russian context. While previously examined narratives were surely set in Russia with Russian heroes and heroines, at this point Gor’kii begins integrating specific sociopolitical issues to draw doubt to Russia’s ostensibly religious government’s morality. More specifically, the story foregrounds the so-called “Jewish question,” which ignited Gor’kii’s sympathy. The issue came to a head in Russian politics following a series of widely publicized pogroms around the turn of the twentieth century. For that reason, “Cain and Artem” denotes the beginning of contemporary, morally imitable character archetypes in Gor’kii’s works. The story evaluates particular sociopolitical issues of Russian populations, such as Jews and the urban poor, in Russia by creating an ethic from their interaction. Gor’kii’s solution to these modern moral quandaries lies in realigning the “sacred” with the powerless masses.

There are multiple potential explanations for the increased intricacy and attention devoted to “Cain and Artem.” The most likely reason for the emergence of moral types at this juncture is the conflict between Gor’kii’s admiration for the Jewish faith and people and the Russian Empire’s persecution against Jews. While his feelings show through the story, the clearest explanation of Gor’kii’s feelings toward Jews materializes in his speech “On Jews” [“*O evreiakh”*] (1906) when there was already distance between him and his country and compatriots, whom he was sharply rebuking. More than just a plea for Russians to act more civilized, though, Gor’kii discusses in detail the lessons he believes all of humanity can learn from Judaism. In the speech given to a crowd at Grand Central Station in New York, he recounts the impression the writings of Jewish sage and scholar Hillel (also called Hillel the Elder, Hillel HaBavli) left upon him. Gor’kii singles out Hillel’s attention to the individual as especially estimable, generalizing “Jewish wisdom” as “more universally human and significant than any other.”[[52]](#footnote-53) Above all else, however, Gor’kii admired Hillel’s—and by extension Judaism’s—expansive interpretation of the golden rule: “If you are not for yourself, then who is for you? But if you are only for yourself, then what are you for?” as he recalls from his youth.[[53]](#footnote-54) Loving one’s neighbor is not just moral justice, it is a social imperative for survival and meaning. For that reason, the pogrom in his hometown, Nizhnii Novgorod, one of many attacks on the Jewish population in the southwest of the Empire, was particularly poignant for him. On 7-8 June 1884, several dozen citizens of the central district of Kanavino captured and killed local Jewish residents, events to which the sixteen-year-old Aleksei Peshkov was witness.[[54]](#footnote-55) This would later become the basis for his story “Pogrom” (1901), a follow-up to “Cain and Artem” to more explicitly challenge Russians’ thinking about Judaism. Before then, however, an unknown impetus occurred in the summer or autumn of 1898 to spark Gor’kii’s renewed fervor and sympathy for Russian Jews. The writing of “Cain and Artem” in that year would become the first in many instances stretching beyond the 1917 revolution that Gor’kii advocated for Jews in the country. Even in his “Untimely Thoughts: Notes on the Revolution and Culture” of 1917-1918, he notes that “The equal rights of Jews is one of the greatest accomplishments of our revolution. Having recognized Jews as Russian equal in the law, we removed a shameful, bloody, and dirty spot from our conscious.”[[55]](#footnote-56) That expression of desire for equal treatment began to take form with “Cain and Artem.”

The story centers around two men in an unnamed town and their relationships with each other and society*.* One, Artem, is the local “despot” whom Gor’kii describes as “a colossal fellow with a head of curly black hair in a thick cap.”[[56]](#footnote-57) When he is seen walking down the street, whispers of warning that “Artem is coming” clear the streets.[[57]](#footnote-58) The twenty-five-year-old thug is a friend of no one by choice, whether due to being an invincible threat to the men or an unattainable jealousy to the women. He makes his living from his looks by wooing female sellers or stealing from men, which puts him “on bad terms” with everyone.[[58]](#footnote-59) He is presented as Russian throughout and hails from the Simbirsk Governate.[[59]](#footnote-60) More than anything, Gor’kii describes Artem as “apathetic to everything” [*ravnodushen ko vsemu*].[[60]](#footnote-61) It is such indifference that Gor’kii labels as both “one of the most serious crimes of humanity” and “especially characteristic of [Russians]” in “On Jews“.[[61]](#footnote-62) The other character at the center of the story is the “small, nimble Jewish man with a sharp head and thin, yellow face,” Haim [*Khaim*].[[62]](#footnote-63) Though it is not his name, the townspeople call him Cain [*Kain*] because the moniker, shared by the Bible’s archetypal murderer, is “more familiar to people, and in it there is great deal of insult.”[[63]](#footnote-64) More importantly, however, the crowd chose the name because, “it seemed to everyone that it wholly accurately depicts a Jew’s body and soul while at the same time offending him.”[[64]](#footnote-65) While among the brash Russians, the character of a persecuted Jewish man transforms into a Christ-like figure who turns the other cheek and returns their hatred with a smile. “It was easy to offend Cain: when they made fun of him, he only guiltily smiled and at times even helped others laugh at him, as though paying in advance his offenders for the right to exist among them,” Gor’kii explains.[[65]](#footnote-66) Gor’kii's first inversion, that Cain and Abel of Chapter Four of Genesis are Cain and Artem of Shikhan, challenges an acceptable social prejudice; Artem (Gor’kii’s choice for the closest ethnically Russian names to Abel [Avel’]), is the hegemon, while Cain is the victim of humanity’s inhumanity. Haim’s true name, חיים, which means “life” in Hebrew, adds another layer of inverted symbolism: it is Cain’s—not Abel’s—life stolen in this story.

Gor’kii does not give many hints about their exact location and names only the street on which they sell and trade during the day, Shikhan (also a regional term for any one of the large grassy hills found in southern Russia along the Volga River and Ural Mountains).[[66]](#footnote-67) It is far from a picturesque location, however. Shikhan is a hellish landscape where litter and grime cover the ground and the worst of society does business among the shadows, as the sun’s rays rarely ever reach the street surface. It is perhaps then appropriate that a dictatorial figure like Artem would rise to the top of Shikhan’s social hierarchy, like John Milton’s Satan ruling over Pandemonium. Gor’kii notes that, after hearing a begging orphan asking for any change “for Christ’s sake, a kopeck,” it was even “the name of Christ sounds strange and foreign to everyone on the street.”[[67]](#footnote-68) Its inhabitants are appropriately base and offensive. Cain, branded as a murderer by his neighbors for his type, a Jew, is not their only victim. In fact, he is but another target of their hate for their neighbors. The people, “offended by the fate” of being poor Russians, as Gor’kii describes them, regularly “insult a neighbor, and they know how to do it, for it is the only way they can avenge themselves.”[[68]](#footnote-69) In this case, the Christian story is just one weapon of their ire toward others. Cain is largely impervious to their abrasive behavior and speech, however, and his archetypal role as moral standard-bearer is the locus of conflict with the typical Russian. In the story Russia and Russians are depicted as the place and people who would belittle, threaten, and wholly reject their savior if he returned to live among them.

The story arc, which follows the rise and fall of the short-lived friendship between Cain and Artem, transposes the Biblical parable of the Good Samaritan. This parable is Gor’kii’s most detailed transposition thus far and serves as the inspiration for the beginning of Cain and Artem’s acquaintance with one another. As told in Luke 10:25-37, a Jewish man travels from Jerusalem to Jericho, where, like everyone else in the ancient sin city, he becomes involved in crime. One day, the Jewish man becomes the victim of his band of violent thieves and is left for dead. A Jewish priest and a Jewish man from another tribe pass him by but offer no help. Finally, a Samaritan, belonging to a group historically inimical to Jews, walks past and saves the man from death, putting him up in an inn with his own money. In Gor’kii’s story once again, the roles are flipped from what one would expect. We see transposed parallels of this parable, in which Artem is the betrayed robber left nearly beaten to death and Cain plays the Samaritan. Immediately after once more seducing and stealing from the women of Shikhan, a group of local men attacks Artem by surprise. “Drunk from the wine, he did not defend himself well, and then these people for almost a whole hour took their countless grievances on him,” before stealing from the unconscious Artem and dragging his limp body away from the road. After some time, Cain walks by and finds the naked and bruised strongman, immediately offering assistance.[[69]](#footnote-70) While the Samaritan offers the Jew wine for his pain, Cain is carrying a bottle of vodka that he is willing to share with Artem—a much more likely Russian alternative to the original drink. To parallel the Samaritan’s anointment of the beaten Jew with oil, Cain washes Artem’s body with water, a highly symbolic act found elsewhere in the Bible. The man whom everyone mocks and abuses comes to the aid of the powerful Artem, whom, he mentions, he previously thought of as Samson.[[70]](#footnote-71) In some Orthodox Christian icons, the Samaritan is depicted as Christ himself while caring for the injured Jew. This very Russian reimagination of the parable definitively shows that Cain here is acting as Gor’kii’s savior figure.

The parable of the Good Samaritan appears in the Gospel of Luke as Jesus is explaining his Great Commandments. Challenging Jesus to explain himself, a lawyer asks for an example of loving one’s neighbor as oneself, and the Samaritan becomes the embodiment of this commandment to do good acts on account of one’s beliefs. Gor’kii, though, foregoing the first statement of faith in God, redefines virtue by drawing a sharp contrast between that which is good and that which is Russian. He likens the Shikhan, which is exclusively Russian except for Cain, to Jericho, which is portrayed as the antithesis of Holy Jerusalem in the Bible. Jericho, like the setting of Cain and Artem, is a place for material and sensual gratification. The Russia portrayed in the story is as inhospitable to virtue as Jericho. When goodness appears in Shikhan, it is an unwelcome foreigner. The Samaritan is more than just a virtuous passerby, however. Jesus, speaking to a Jewish audience at the time, spoke of Samaritans because they were a culturally and politically oppressed group in Ancient Israel. Like Cain, the Samaritan should have been the least likely to stop and help, had everyone been acting solely out of self-interest, as they do while engaged in business and pleasure on Shikhan. Readers acutely see this contrast when Gor’kii immediately pivots to the question of Jewish persecution after Cain finds and wakes Artem. Cain gets the impression that Artem does not believe the little Jewish man could have helped after so many walked past, and Cain assumes it is due to antisemitism like everyone else shows.

“You know how well I live? You know that, yes? Haven’t I–sorry–suffered beatings from you? And didn’t you laugh at the lousy Jew? What? It’s the truth! You will excuse my truth, you swore. Don’t be angry! I’m just saying that you. Like all people, have chased a Jew... For what, eh? Is not the Jew the son of your god and has not the same God given a soul to you and him?”[[71]](#footnote-72)

With that Artem vows to protect the otherwise defenseless Cain from interference from other Russians while selling his wares, and Cain erupts in admiration and gratefulness toward his new keeper. Here Gor’kii more plainly repeats what his Good Samaritan transposition stated earlier: Russians must realize that Jews are their neighbors and not their enemies, and should act as Cain does.

Gor’kii experiments with the idea of a virtuous Russian, and for a while, Artem’s defense of Cain brings benefit to both parties. Cain could conduct business without harassment for the first time since arriving, and Artem felt satisfied in a way he had not before. Asking himself why he offered to watch after Cain, he reminds himself that “he is such a kind and honest [person], he says everything directly and from the soul. Having had that thought, Artem suddenly smiled; he had long been tormented by some undefined desire, and he finally now understood it.”[[72]](#footnote-73) Cain also teaches Artem to pray directly to God as the Jews do and Artem begins to transition into a meeker, happier version of his past self. One day, about a month after he was saved by Cain, Artem finds himself in the Grabilovka, Shikhan’s tavern. Turning to the owner, he asks, “Cain hasn’t been by?” to which the proprietor responds ”H’should be soon... His time is soon.”[[73]](#footnote-74) The phrase the owner uses, “His time is soon...” [*Ego vremia blizko...*], reminds one of Jesus’s warnings that he would soon die or, perhaps more apt, the instances in Saint John’s Revelations prophesying the Day of Judgment to happen soon.[[74]](#footnote-75) While waiting for Cain, Artem is confronted by a man known as the Ragged Bridegroom [*Dranyi Zhenikh*], who appeared once briefly earlier in the story, just before we learn that Christ was not a name heard on Shikhan. His name suggests that the Ragged Bridegroom is an anti-Christ figure. The parable of Matthew 25:1-13 compares Jesus to the bridegroom of Heaven, of whom people whisper when he walks down the street as they do with Artem. The Ragged Bridegroom thus acts as the foil against Artem and Christ’s divinity. When Cain appears at the Grabilovka, Artem is finally confronted with an immediate need to defend Cain as he promised, a test for a moral Russian.

In “Cain and Artem” the society is both the illness and symptom. For Artem, the public represents all that is against an exemplary citizen, particularly if he is Jewish. Upon Cain’s arrival to the tavern, Artem initially welcomes him to sit in an adjacent seat to share a drink, but the Ragged Bridegroom quickly goes on the attack against the Jewish man. Mocking tones of condescension pour out of the Bridegroom's mouth, but Artem, despite the initial impulse to violence, only watches from his stool. The barkeeper applauds Artem’s restraint, saying “You acted exemplarily and splendidly, Artem Mikhailych ... exactly according to the Gospels... Like in the parable about the merciful Samaritan. Cain was in the pus and scabs... But you didn’t disdain.”[[75]](#footnote-76) Something in the Ragged Bridegroom’s teasing disturbs Artem’s peacefulness, and a “strange heaviness laid on the heart of Artem” from that moment. His mood takes a sharp turn for the worse as it is increasingly swayed by public chatter. Artem begins accosting Cain for meekly and quietly sitting at the table next to him, but the feeling passes and he returns to normal conversation upon Cain's expression of sympathy for Artem’s plummeting social standing. Things are never the same again, however. As a sneering crowd begins to form around the tavern to point and laugh at Artem at the Ragged Bridegroom’s behest, he begins to lose his resolve and walks away from the bar alone through the crowd and toward the mountains. After a similar scene happens again, in which the Bridegroom sings his insulting songs in public, Artem invites Cain to talk with him. Readers see the degradation of decency within the Russian context as Gor’kii sees it; even seeds of good are culled before they can sprout.

What follows demonstrates how readily people will discard their morals in service of social standing. The thug Artem appears for the first time to Cain nervous and demure, speaking in erratic, unfinished phrases and frustrated outbursts. “And I should tell you, that I can’t anymore...” he begins. “What can’t you do?” asks Cain, to which Artem responds, “Nothing. I can’t! It disgusts me... It’s not my business...”[[76]](#footnote-77) Eventually, he strings together enough thoughts for Cain to understand what is happening. Learning that Artem will no longer protect him, he sits “quietly, like a corpse.” Cain asks quietly, as he did when Artem first doubted him, “Because I’m a Jew?” Artem responds to him, saying “What is a Jew? We are all Jews before the Lord...”[[77]](#footnote-78) Artem uses for the first time the word “Lord” instead of “God”, connoting a sense of reverence. Having prayed and spoken with Cain about religion, it would be reasonable to conclude that Artem has become, at least in part, a man of faith. As such, he may be able to look past the reason why everyone else acts cruelly toward Cain, but in Shikhan. the Russians do not like each other much more than they like any Jewish person. Faith may have elevated Artem from Russia’s lowest lows, as we will see featured prominently in *In the Depths*, but the people’s baseness, as represented by the Ragged Bridegroom, is nonetheless indomitable. Cain interrupts further attempts at an explanation with a quote from Psalm 93:16-17, saying to the world and no one at the same time, “Who will rise up for me against the wicked? Who will stand up for me against the evildoers?”[[78]](#footnote-79) The psalm is King David’s peak of doubt during an entreaty to God for defense and justice in a sinner’s world. Cain finally loses all hope of retaining his keeper when he finds out that Artem is preparing revenge against the people who beat and robbed him. When Cain realizes what will happen, he asks Artem to confirm the evil deed as though he was the one “murdered” [*sprosil Kain ubito*]. Despite the brotherly relationship they had before, Artem symbolically kills the innocence and faith in Cain like the Biblical Cain killed his brother Abel. Artem’s final words to Cain, “Farewell, brother!” [*Proshchai, brat!*], testify to the relationship they had as well as to the magnitude of casual cruelty Artem shows his brother.[[79]](#footnote-80) Though Cain continues to plead with him as he walks away, Artem gives nothing more than grunts and glances to him. Indifference triumphs over good because of a social inertia, which must be broken before ushering in change.

Gor’kii continues to struggle with the seemingly insurmountable evil he sees in the people around him, as represented by Artem. The story plays out like a thought experiment envisioning the battle between good and evil in a Russian arena. Virtue is so rare in Russia itself that it comes in the form of a foreign import. Gor’kii’s admiration for the Jewish faith shines through in Cain’s character, though Cain is undoubtedly Christianized through literary references to the Bible. The only character without sin or vice, Cain becomes an example of living virtuously, but not necessarily piously, as though a priest or monastic would. His selflessness, patience, and humanity become a moral standard that others, such as Artem, want to emulate. In this experiment, however, Gor’kii still finds that even the second coming of Christ could not fully convince Russians to lay down their malice and avarice toward their neighbors. If anything, his unassuming moral superiority only aggravates the inhumanity in those around him. Cain, despite doing everything by the book, despite living according to the highest conceivable moral authority, was impotent in the face of Russians’ dark impulses. More specifically, Gor’kii seems to suggest that contemporary economics play a significant role in forging modern society’s moral fetters. The Shikhan is not just a Russian place, it is a marketplace in Russian hell. Residents purposefully interfere with Cain’s attempts to make money. Artem was attacked for his contemptuous behavior, which he undertook in order to feed and clothe himself for free. Orphans beg for kopecks alongside the road. The pursuit of money, its unequal distribution, and its weaponization against the already powerless underlie nearly all of the evils that beat good in the story. More so than “On a Raft,” “Cain and Artem” identifies poverty as the growing, festering root of Russians’ cruelty toward others. This story of greed is only the beginning of Gor’kii’s warnings of what kind of Shikhan awaits Russia if nothing changes.

## Revelation and Day of Judgment in Foma Gordeev and Three Men

As the end of the century neared, Gor’kii increasingly struggled with the savior narrative informing “Cain and Artem.” A lingering question asked him if adhering to the principle of “love thy neighbor” was still useful advice for people like Khaim when they had to be neighbors with people like Artem. The question of good and evil, which started with the playful reimaginations of Genesis, has come to a critical point. In their interactions, Chaim discovered from Artem that virtue cannot overcome modern people’s self-interest, which represents a new social order for meek characters like Mitrii and Chaim. This new moral viewpoint colors the worlds of Gor’kii’s stories, and broadly describes a distinct period in some of his early works. The author’s feelings toward humanity are rarely clearer—or darker—around the turn of the twentieth century following “Cain and Artem.” For the following half-decade the characters, primary, background, as individuals, and as a population come to represent a source of vice and evil. Readers glimpse a preview of this world in “Cain and Artem,” where Russia is depicted as a shady back alley filled with pushers and gangs. Until Artem’s rejection of Khaim at the end, his moral authority was obvious, even if it was a reason for ridicule. However, when the titular characters’ relationship turned from spiritual to transactional, Gor’kii’s depiction of the public took a sharp turn. As exemplified in his first novels and plays, the new century coincides with a loss of faith in Christian righteousness based on the Bible’s tenets. More specifically, it is at this point when Gor’kii’s belief in good to conquer evil surrenders to his observations of society around him. In these works, the most fundamental assumptions are in flux.

The following section marks the final stage Gor’kii’s early struggle with the question of theodicy. Reading Gor’kii’s first two novels side by side, I argue that *Foma Gordeev* and *Three Men* observe the decline of faith in the Christian social model and the vacuum of morality and religious sensibilities leading to the author’s post-Christian transition. In that way, these works written around 1900 portray the conflict between the diametrically opposed Christian worldview of the past and the modern capitalist self-interest that Gor’kii sees as its primary threat. Both Foma and Il’ia experience this conflict in their inner selves, as they exist strongly within both Christian and merchant spheres of influence. Foma and Il’ia are directly involved in the trade as a part of their work for their families’ companies on the Volga River. At the same time, the boys grow up with a Christian worldview, thanks in particular to their grandfathers and godfathers. They are products of the Orthodox Christian old world in thought and name.

A shift in the social structure is accompanied by a change in Gor’kii’s thinking about the question of theodicy, the problem of evil in a world created by an omnipotent, just God. His views undergo an evolution similar to society, and that is more than correlation. The community, often historically tied together by the Church, no longer guards individuals against ills such as hunger and exploitation. This is where one can see the difference between Gor’kii’s concept of community as the fundamental unit of life and Nietzsche’s individualist approach. Beginning with *Foma Gordeev*, however, the we see relationship between individual and society is rejected and the premise of theodicy is itself turned upside down. That inversion involves several reversals of what I call “old-world” thinking and practice. In the Christian world, theodicy grapples with doubt of God’s role in a universe that experiences evil. The word itself comes from the Greek roots *theos*, or God, and *díkē*, a trial of justice. Theodicean questioning is thus a trial of God’s goodness, of a legitimately divine righteousness. This raises an important corollary: engaging with this line of thinking is an inherently theistic endeavor. While many understand it as raising doubt of God’s existence, we may only ask it in the context of God. For the very premise of theodicy is the justification of a God that already exists, whose restraint allows cruelty. Put another way, for Gottfried Leibniz to coin the term theodicy in his 1710 *Théodicée* treatise to justify God, the idea of God must have already been dominant in society because God was only put into doubt upon observing phenomena casting that very doubt. This new phase from *Foma Gordeev* to *The Lower Depths* presupposes no such God. In fact, when characters come up against a savior-like figure in works following “Cain and Artem,” society justifies the existence and authority of the evil, against which it once, even if meekly, defended itself. In the broader scheme of Gor’kii’s transition, this theodicean inversion is a forebear of the post-Christian turn toward a new God.

One intrinsic quality of this evil is that it subsists on individual’s self-interest, particularly when financial interests play a role, in opposition to existing social capital. As we have seen in the Christmas stories, more prominently in “On a Raft,” and once more in “Cain and Artem,” the acquisition of money instigates and aggravates depravity among Gor’kii’s characters. In those earlier works, economics is in the background, but nonetheless noticeable. The indigent orphan begs for kopecks in the Christmas tales and commerce brings the merchants to the river in the Easter story. During this period of theodicy’s unraveling, the socioeconomic status of characters plays a leading role in Gor’kii’s stories and becomes an indicator of characters’ personality. Savior figures disappear from the world, and people, particularly merchants, are introduced and qualified by their ability to create and wield wealth in the form of financial capital. While until this point there were the faceless immoral onlookers, here Gor’kii shows the face of those passersby from the parable of the Good Samaritan as merchants. Gor’kii seems to turn his attention to the wealthy fully and addresses the works around this period toward this rising power in Russian society. All of *Foma Gordeev* (1899), *Three Men* (1900), *The Philistines* (1901), and *The Lower Depths* (1902) bring into contrast a contemptuous self-indulgence among the prosperous and the pitiful plight of the impoverished in an economic zero-sum game. Labor, too, begins to appear as a measure of human effort, which will feature prominently later in the godbuilding years. Most importantly, we see the exploitation of labor as a point of contention between the laborers and owners of the products of labor, a predecessor to revolutionary arguments for socialism starting with *Mother*.

At the center of these narratives are the Russian merchant estate [*kupecheskoe soslovie, soslovie kuptsov*] and growing prominence of socioeconomics that are changed by the new concentration of wealth among the merchantry. The merchant estate had existed in the Russian Empire from its earliest years as a nation, and it was considered the highest estate with the exception of the nobles [*dvoriane*]. Outside of Saint Petersburg and Moscow, economic activity was perhaps no more evident than in Gor’kii’s hometown, Nizhnii Novgorod, nested between Europe’s biggest river, the Volga, and its largest tributary, the Oka river. Gor’kii himself was born in this estate—his father was a carpenter and his mother from the lower merchantry [*meshchantsvo*]—though he did eventually live and work with merchants. It was likely during his adolescence after leaving home around twelve years old that he first took notice of the Russian merchantry. The result was that, more than anything for Gor’kii, this stratum became associated with and metonymically represented by capital or money. Like “Cain and Artem” the novels and dramas of the period negotiate Christianity’s purpose in the Russian Empire in a distinctly commercial environment. Foma and Il’ia, the main characters of the novels, must navigate their religious search while consistently encountering the temptations of the merchant lifestyle.

Gor’kii’s use of the Bible is unique during this period and no less important to understanding context and message. The coming of the post-Christian world is marked by the same moral lessons that Gor’kii has employed to this point, particularly the Psalms and the most fundamental verses of the Gospels, including the Sermon on the Mount. However, where the hopeful passages of the Good Samaritan and the Resurrection once set the tone, Gor’kii reorients toward Judgment Day and the end times. In more practical terms, this use is represented by a partial shift from the Gospels to two unexplored areas of the Bible, the Old Testament’s Books of Wisdom and the New Testament’s final book, the Book of Revelation. The ancient Books of Wisdom include Job, the Psalter, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs, the Wisdom of Solomon, and the Book of Sirakh, according to the Orthodox canon. These are the primary teachings on moral living of Tanakh and Old Testament, among which the Book of Job undoubtedly holds the most influence for Gor’kii. This great tale of doubt and questioning has long been seen as Gor’kii works to understand his circumstances. However, in this dark time, for example, Job’s skepticism of faith is quoted to reinforce doubt among Russian merchants. In addition, books of the Old Testament not yet seen, such as Proverbs and Sirakh, appear to emphasize the severity of society’s fall. The few Gospel excerpts that do in fact make an appearance likewise forebode reckoning. Revelation is introduced for the first time to Gor’kii’s transpositions, another signal of significant change in the author’s outlook. In *Foma Gordeev* and to an even greater degree *Three Men*, the impending Judgment Day becomes increasingly real for Gor’kii and his characters. End-times motifs remind readers of the consequences of heresy, even if the majority joins in on the evildoing. Before examining the details of *Foma Gordeev* and *Three Men*, we should consider the connotations of so-called “speaking voices” [govoriashchee imia] taken from the Bible.

Like Cain and Artem, Foma and Il’ia carry the names of important characters from the Bible, both the Old and New Testaments in these works, which affirm in many ways the novels’ themes of faithlessness and judgment. Foma, or Thomas, is one of the original twelve disciples that followed Christ as pious students throughout the New Testament. He is most strongly associated with two descriptors: the “the twin” [*bliznets*] and “the doubtful” [*neveruiushchii*], namely of Christ’s divinity. His original Greek name, *didymos*, means “one of twin children,” which exegetical sources conceptualize as his two contrasting instincts. This inner tension expresses itself outwardly in the apostle’s congenial fused pair of fingers and the transformation from skeptically curious to devoutly faithful. Chapter 20 of the Book of John speaks of Thomas’s moment of transition to being a follower after publicly calling into question the divine nature of Jesus. John 20:25, “if I do not see the nail wounds in [Christ’s] hands, if I cannot put my finger into his nail wounds, if I cannot lay my hands on his ribs, I will not believe,” summarizes the open-minded skepticism Thomas embodies. Naturally, in the Gospels, Christ’s divinity is immediately proven, and Thomas obediently joins the fold as promised. This transposition provides the character’s arc for Gor’kii’s Foma, likewise defined by an inner conflict that drives him to life-changing actions and consequences.

Foma Gordeev, whose last name comes from the Russian root for “pride” [*gord*]*,* is host to both the Orthodox Christian and material worlds. These two conflicting value sets that we have until now seen only in separate opposing characters, like Mitrii and Sergei in “On a Raft” or Khaim and Artem before. Throughout his adolescence Foma inherits these worldviews from his father, a wealthy merchant, and his godfather, Maiakin. The novel describes his vacillation between these two selves as the world pushes him to choose his priorities. The need to make money in order to feed and shelter oneself was no stranger to Gor’kii, though the spiritual lessons warning against the accumulation of individual wealth was often on his mind. Foma is a powerful character transposition for its representation of this tension, for beginning with a familiar doubtfulness, and for the existentially significant question that so strongly defines Thomas’s role in the Gospel narrative. The novel culminates in the choice between diverging paths, either to this world or the other, decided in that moment of great doubt.

Elijah, the English equivalent of Iliia or the more modern Il’ia, plays a crucial role in tying prophesies of the Old Testament to their realization in the New Testament. His name, originally from Hebrew, translates to “My God” and contains the holy name YHWH. For Christians, he ranks among the most important OT saints because of his role in the Christ’s Second Coming [*Vtoroe prishestvie Khristovo*]. This is first mentioned in the Book of Malachi, the final book of the Jewish prophets, though Iliia is also associated with a number of miracles throughout the Hebrew scriptures. All four Gospels as well as the Book of Revelations discuss Illia in the context of that verse from Malachi, that he is to “come before and prepare everything” for Judgment Day.[[80]](#footnote-81) (This return to the human world is only possible because Iliia never died during his time on Earth according to the Old Testament book of 2 Kings, which describes his ascension into heaven.[[81]](#footnote-82)) During his return, Illia travels around Jerusalem and neighboring regions to assure people of the messiah’s imminent arrival and lead the people to purify themselves spiritually in preparation for Judgment Day. Failure to cleanse oneself would result in a limbo state, or in a broader reading of the Synoptic Gospels’ description of Iliia’s role, a sinning population cleaved from the divine and collectively sent straight to hell.

Readers find Il’ia in circumstances significantly worse than the simply tragic merchantry in Foma’s experience. Rather, from the outset, Gor’kii describes a world near a moral rock-bottom. In the Russia of *Three Men*, sin is a way of life that is flaunted and celebrated by the public, particularly the merchant estate. The opening scene sets the tone with a description of Il’ia’s paternal grandfather, Antipas Lunev. His name corresponds with the martyr Antipas of Pergamos, who appears once in the Bible—the second chapter of the Book of Revelation. The saint was an early Christian in the Roman city of Pergamos, which John describes as “the throne of Satan” that killed the faithful Antipas.[[82]](#footnote-83) In a similar way, the novel describes that, having achieved financial success to become a “rich man,” the lack of spiritual fulfillment in merchantry life drove Il’ia’s grandfather to become a monastic hermit in the woods.[[83]](#footnote-84) He never says a word for the rest of his life, which lasts until local authorities tear down his hut and in the process also take his life. Il’ia's father, Iakov, gladly takes up the business his father left behind, and boasts that sin is as natural as a feather on a raven if he himself is that raven.[[84]](#footnote-85) Playing the role of spiritual advisor is Il’ia’s maternal grandfather, Eremei, much like young Peshkov and Vasilii Vasilievich Kashirin. Eremei is one of the weakest of Gor’kii’s spiritual mentor characters, and notably makes up Bible stories to entertain Il‘ia and other children.[[85]](#footnote-86) The rest of the population Il’ia meets among the merchant estate is not self-serving like in *Foma Gordeev*, but also encourages and justifies offenses like theft and violence in pursuit of money. Il’ia therefore must choose between “love thy neighbor” and “exploit thy neighbor for financial gain” with the added urgency of Judgment Day’s impending arrival. If he fails to lead those around him to a more righteous life, the end of old-world Russia will be damning.

*Foma Gordeev* and *Three Men* together reveal Gor’kii’s decline into profound disillusionment, a result of the inability to rationalize his surroundings through theodicean arguments. His first play, *The Lower Depths* (1902), depicts a long-term projection of the world based on observations in *Foma Gordeev* and *Three Men,* namely the moral vacuum found in the merchantry and eventually everyone. Before looking at the apocalyptic dredges of that drama, however, it is first necessary to see how Gor’kii’s main characters lost their faith in the authoritative goodness of Orthodox Christianity. I will begin by tracing how the transposition of Thomas the Apostle into Foma’s character arc organizes the novel’s plot. Gor’kii uses that arc to all but destroy previous arguments in favor of theodicy. Then, placing *Three Men* into conversation with *Foma Gordeev*, I look at how transpositions grow toward the Judgment Day scene at the novel’s conclusion. In a twist of irony, I show how Il’ia’s inheritance of the Biblical story of Elijah is perhaps only Gor’kii’s second narrative transposed without inversion. However, the character is never able to lead others to salvation as Elijah does.

Christian doctrine offers a path to salvation by modeling Jesus’s behavior in preparation for the return of Christ to judge the Earth’s inhabitants. Being both full human and fully divine, the dual nature of Christ was in conflict, and the response was to empty out human will in deference to God’s will. Orthodoxy teaches *kénōsis*, from AG κένωσις, “emptying,” which says that that Christ “emptied himself out” so that his human nature may surrender to his divine nature.[[86]](#footnote-87) Having overcome his earthly fetters, he is able to carry out God’s mission, an example that is taught widely in the Orthodox faith. This teaching has appeared in previous secular literature, as well. Numerous studies have examined how Dostoevsky’s Zosima of *Brothers Karamazov* and Tikhon of *The Possessed*, for example, authentically demonstrate the spiritual power of kenosis.[[87]](#footnote-88) The paradox of emptying oneself only to thereby be filled God's presence is central to Christian teachings, and this contradiction in words remains tenable because there is something to replace the ephemera that once governed a believer’s will. Without God’s will to take control, however, it is impossible to say which desires will drive a truly empty person, which is precisely the case with the novels’ heroes. While Gor’kii’s characters in *Foma Gordeev* and *Three Men* inch toward the apocalyptic Judgment Day, my analysis will focus on how Foma and Il’ia prepare themselves for the end of the world, as observed in their inner dialogues. On the one hand, they are increasingly doubtful about God’s immanent existence. On the other hand, they are acutely aware of the imminent judgment, each character conveying this knowledge in their own ways. Foma and Il’ia share, however, this tension between what may be simply called good and evil impulses. Their virtuous sides come from old-world Russia as passed down by their spiritual advisors or godfathers; their virtues are offset by apathy and antipathy toward their neighbor. Between the two poles is a kenotic silence that reveals the inner true self and makes space for God’s will, but only if one is receptive to it. If there is no God, there is only earthly pleasure and suffering, and barring that, only eternal emptiness remains.

Through this lens we will look at Foma and Il’ia’s transpositions as they navigate a bleak survival in Russian Empire. After a tense childhood, the Foma’s first encounter with deep silence occurs concurrently with the death of his father, Ignat, the merchant shipper. To his only son, Ignat was also a symbol of old-world Russia. Generally a serious, unemotional man, Ignat’s most human of moments comes when he hears Foma reading confidently from the beginning of Psalms.[[88]](#footnote-89) Until the death scene, Foma’s influences are often similarly two-sided and balanced between the spiritual and earthly realms. Maiakin, Foma’s godfather and other major influence, reads to Foma and other children from the Bible passages in Job. The book is the Bible’s strongest theodicean argument. However, he is not reading the verses one would expect considering the overall message of the book. Instead of a justification of suffering for the promise of eternal grace, Maiakin quotes Job’s weakest moments that highlight his faithlessness in times of gruesome suffering. This includes, for example, Job’s body covered in worms as it wastes a way (Job 7:5) and a rebuke by a friend of Job, Eliphaz (Job 15:14), whom God later castigates (Job 42:7-9). Therefore, when Foma begins to doubt suffering’s significance, his soul hears loudly the warring sides of his split nature in the silence. That first deeply silent moment occurs in a garden when Foma witnesses Ignat pass before his very eyes.

In *Foma Gordeev*, the father’s death marks the beginning of Foma’s struggles with his two natures: the spiritual and the material, the Father and his father’s inheritance. Before long in the garden, Ignat and Foma fall into quiet meditation as “again a solemn silence enveloped the garden’s mature beauty.”[[89]](#footnote-90) Fear grows on Ignat’s face as he, nearing death, takes turn crying out to “Lord Jesus Christ!” and his son to listen, his screams alternating with the church bells ringing for a morning mass. These two forces call back and forth to each other for Foma’s soul. The father conveys to Foma amidst interruptions by the ringing church bells the summary of his life’s wisdom: “Do not depend on people... Do not expect much from them... We all live in order to take, not to give... O, Lord! Have mercy on a sinner!”[[90]](#footnote-91) In his final moments in life, he offers Foma a lesson diametrically opposed to Christ’s teachings. After Ignat fully passes, Foma is left alone in the middle of an empty garden, a reflection of his internal state. Foma’s primal screams now take turns with ringing bells to pierce the silence. A balance between the self and the other is straying from a harmonious medium. From here forward Foma is consistently brought back to this empty silence as he pours out his Christian tradition and personal ego.

Gor’kii’s *Three Men*, on the other hand, begins from its very first sentence amidst a deathly vacant silence. The narrator underlines the lifelessness of the world: “There are many lonely graves scattered among the forests of Kerzhenets.”[[91]](#footnote-92) We meet Antip Lunev, Il’ia’s grandfather, who, “having lived in earthly sin until the age of fifty,” took a vow of silence. He appeared as though he was dead before the grave. Visitors, who arrive intentionally or by unlucky happenstance, call him “scary” and describe him as “dried up” from continuous fasting and prayer. Even when his wife and children visited to give him food, Antip “also did not say a word to them.” The harsh extremes of Antip’s life swing from material to spiritual absolutism, and silence is what remains after ideological counter positions stabilize, like matter and anti-matter canceling one another out and leaving nothing. The lesson of the Garden of Gethsemane is that a person may empty themself as Christ did, but the rest is in God’s hands, so to speak. In other words, Antip and others can suppress their human will in order that they may be filled with divine will, but they can do nothing but wait to receive the Holy Spirit. One must sit—or kneel—and wait for God to arrive. Antip’s death at the hands of state officials suggests that belief in God persisted for him. The police [*ispravnik*] campaign to loot monasteries reached Antip’s secluded monastic cell, and in tearing down his shelter the officers killed him, who refused to listen or speak. In the final moments of his life, his only words in decades, “Dear God... Forgive them!” indicates Antip died with his faith intact, having been filled with God’s spirit in silence. However, such prolonged, exhaustive kenotic emptying of the self also suggests that God lies only at the end of such extensive distance from humanity. His grandson, Il’ia, who desires so desperately to be included in the merchantry, will find an even more intractable separation between himself and God.

Il’ia Lunev rarely has moments of quiet in his life, which is instead full of conflicting influences and impulses. Like Foma, he grows up with a merchant father whom he loses during childhood, though in *Three Men* crime takes away the main character’s role model for material wealth. Iakov Lunev, whom the other community members called a heretic, is arrested for setting fire to a local forest patch. Il’ia, in another parallel with Foma, is handed over to another guardian who prioritizes spiritual education. In this case, Il’ia has both the rag-and-bone man Eremei and his disfigured, hushed uncle Terentii. As a godfather, Maiakin in *Foma Gordeev* falters at times, for example his quotations against Job’s faithfulness and justification of poverty run counter to Christian teaching. His influence upon Foma, however, is largely positive and in line with old-world Christian morals, and he may be the reason for Foma’s spiritual resistance in the end. Unfortunately for Il’ia, even the wisest and most godly of men in *Three* Men are morally estranged from concept of loving thy neighbor.

In *Three* *Men* there are no truly good people. Therein lies Elijah’s function in the Book of Revelation; the final prophet before Christ's Second Coming returns to a world of sinners in order to prepare them for Judgment Day. Antip Lunev’s story establishes that time has begun, and so even the virtuous among Il’ia are deeply flawed. Eremei soothingly reassures Il’ia of God’s righteousness in judgment, which he explains will come when “the time will strike” at some unknown hour in the future.[[92]](#footnote-93) That same assuredness in God shows its ugly side to Il’ia when faced with actual evil. The town’s blacksmith violently beat his wife to death. A crowd, including Il’ia and Eremei, attempt to confront him about it, but Eremei is unable to utter more than “A-ah you-u!” in the face of murder. This Eremei is in stark contrast to the Biblical Jeremaiah [Ieremiia], another major OT prophet, known for his “Lamentations” about God’s destruction of Jerusalem for its sins. Eremei later asks himself, “Did [the blacksmith] really kill?” to cast enough doubt on the situation to exculpate him of any guilt.[[93]](#footnote-94) Immediately after Eremei retreats from the blacksmith, the silence is punctuated with the first of many anti-theodicean statements: “A villain! That also applies to God!..”[[94]](#footnote-95) The outburst from the crowd both compares the murderer to God and excuses his actions as justified evil because God also has killed. Most significantly in this moment, Il’ia’s immediate reaction following this popular acquittal was to feel pity for the blacksmith. It is then not difficult to trace Il’ia’s decision to take someone’s life back to this moment of silence, imbued with apathy and absent of divine righteousness. In a similar way, Terentii, Il’ia’s uncle and other spiritual mentor, displays a spiritual and a selfish side, though only when beneficial to him. With Eremei and Il’ia he asks, “I, grandfather, praise God, what else can I do?” to win favor with the crowd. After Eremei’s death, Il’ia later finds Terentii looting the deceased’s wallet, taking every last savings Eremei gathered.[[95]](#footnote-96) With such figures as his spiritual mentors, it is little wonder that Il’ia begins to lose his faith.

Belief in God is the dividing point between *Foma Gordeev* and *Three Men* and their central characters. If the young men are at all representative of Gor’kii’s own struggles with God and faith, the difference between belief and unbelief was a major turning point occurring sometime between the writing of the two novels. The tension in the Russia of the novels arises from the specious tenability of Christian faith and the ever-present force of financial capital, which has enabled the merchantry to dehumanize fellow Russians. Gor’kii goes so far as to lay out the problem in front of us in one of Il’ia’s moments of internal dialogue. Daydreaming to the drone of a tavern chorus of voices, Il’ia is reminded that, “grandfather Eremei loved God and saved money bit-by-bit. And Uncle Terentii fears God, but he stole the money. Everybody always has a double inside themselves. In their chests it is as though they have scales, and their heart, like an arrow pointing at times in one and at times in a different direction, weighing the heaviness of the good and the bad.”[[96]](#footnote-97) Each novel gives money great importance for the main characters in the moments that decide their fates. Faced with the death of a father figure, Foma and Il’ia both spend the rest of their respective novels calculating the gravity of virtue and sin, which separates the two characters by the end. In this final section, I look at the figures’ moral decision-making as I seek to understand how Gor’kii came to abandon the Christian God as a force for good.

Much of what makes Foma special stems from his status as an inheritor of the “millions” of rubles his father amassed, while the older merchants of Foma’s father’s generation had spent their lives in pursuit of such wealthy estates. His friendly relationship with the workers employed on the shipping vessels is possible because he does not engage in the role of their supervisor. Foma’s wild bender with colleagues results in workers drowning due to his disregard for lives. Before the chaos, a silence descends upon Foma and the others, and then “a whole hurricane of noise few at Foma, shrill, full of animalistic fear, disgustingly plaintive” as people fall into the water. Once again a cacophony of primal sounds erupts. His apathy toward peers drowning is exemplified in his response to someone crying out for help saying, “Drowning... people are drowning...” Angered by the screams, he yells back, “Are you really people?!”[[97]](#footnote-98) Gor’kii here once again shows the competing impulses in Foma as they exchange words and battle for dominance. In his worst moments Foma is unable to see others’ humanity, a worldview with grave consequences. When confronted about it, however, Foma seeks to return to a quieter life.

His disregard for human life, which resulted in the death of at least two people, is only one part of Foma’s complex nature. Having left his work behind after the accident on the river, Foma recedes from society and takes up prayer, which spurs a partial internal transformation. He asks himself, “What is happening with me?—Who am I?” and decides to live simpler like the people [*narod*].[[98]](#footnote-99) This coincides with another significant act of emptying out his own will. Foma gives his inheritance, including his entire fortune and businesses, to Maiakin in order to “live freely” and search for a new life.[[99]](#footnote-100) It is not a complete surrender of his will, however. In a prayer, Foma swears off money-making and people in general: “What’s the use of business? Money?... The only lie is all of these businesses... I see businessmen and so what? They’re purposefully spinning themselves up in this just to not see themselves... Free them from this fuss.”[[100]](#footnote-101) Not long after that, he concludes his prayer in a different tone, saying “The river flows so that people can travel on it, the tree grows for food, the dog guards the house... Everything in the world can find a justification. But people – like cockroaches – are entirely superfluous on earth... Everything is for them, but what are they for?“[[101]](#footnote-102) Foma is split by the faith in a God that preaches compassion and misanthropy toward those around him, two forces that are diametrically opposed to each other. Eventually there is space for only one in his soul.

The final showdown between the material and spiritual within Foma begins to unfold shortly after his estrangement from the transport business. Initially, Foma and Maiakin discuss labor at home. To Maiakin’s assertion that “a person’s happiness is based on his relationship to his labor,” Foma responds with strong disagreement.[[102]](#footnote-103) “Everything doesn’t sit well with me,” he says, “Business... work... people... If, let’s say, I see that everything is a lie... It’s not the work, but what it is to oneself—a plug.... We plug the emptiness of the soul... Some work hard, others just command and sweat... And they receive more for this... Why is this so? Eh?”[[103]](#footnote-104) He recognizes material wealth as a filler for spiritual nothingness and in doing so questions the true usefulness of the merchant lifestyle. This declaration of spiritual dominance is further reinforced later when Foma confronts Maiakin and the other merchants and, in doing so, permanently severing his financial relationships. Later, at the tavern the argument continues after Maiakin leads a toast to fellow merchants in praise of building the Empire, owning the most expensive houses in town, and paying the highest taxes to the government. Foma's swears to God while offering a verbal rebuke on the decadence of merchants’ accumulated wealth. The scene may remind readers of Christ’s sermon and arrest in Gethsemane when the merchants restrain Foma with force, who shouts “You can’t tie up the truth, you lie!”[[104]](#footnote-105) He describes the human cost and hints at revolution, saying “You didn’t make a life, but a prison... You didn’t build order, but forged chains on people... Do you understand that you are alive only thanks to human patience?”[[105]](#footnote-106) In the background, someone asks “What’s with him? He is going by Scripture or off the top of his head?” Once more he addresses the crowd of merchants: “You didn’t build a life, you built a cesspool! You spread filth and sultriness with your deeds. Do you have a conscious? Do you remember God? A five-ruble note, that’s your God!... You live by other people’s strength... you work with other people’s hands.”[[106]](#footnote-107) The merchants laugh at Foma and call him the “thundering prophet” while he is bound to a chair and full of righteous anger before he finally shuts down. “You didn’t bind my tongue...” he says, but silence takes over the room as “something burned up in him and his soul became dark and empty.”[[107]](#footnote-108) Having given up his personal pleasures, rebuking the merchants leaves Foma with only his faith, which remains tenuous itself.

The novel’s conclusion raises more questions than it answers. Foma parts ways with his old life until learning of Maiakin’s death, after which he returns home for an unknown reason. Foma lives as a pariah in town and frequently spends his time drunkenly wandering the streets while those who recognize him insult and sneer at him. He “very rarely approaches those who call him; he avoids people and doesn’t love to speak with them,” which shows that he has remained an outcast since his outburst in the tavern. Gor’kii concludes Foma’s story with a peculiar phrase attributed to the townspeople who try to talk with the outcast: “Hey, give us a word about the end times [*svetoprestavlenie*], eh? He-he-he! Pro-phet!”[[108]](#footnote-109) From this particularly religious language we can gather that Foma retains faith, but only that Judgment Day is necessarily imminent. The word *svetoprestavlenie* has a strong connection to Christian theology, but it has its own dual meaning. In addition to its religious significance, *svetoprestavlenie* also denotes an irredeemably muddled situation, which would accurately describe Foma’s fate in the novel (as in, “the deadline is tonight and I have yet to write a thing—this is the end of the world!”). Gor’kii, at least for another year, leaves open the possibility for a faithful and a doubting Thomas because he never fully chose a side. Following *Foma Gordeev*, we see by the end of *Three Men* a distinctly apocalyptic answer to this ambiguity shown in Foma.

The exposition of *Three Men* resembles the final scenes of Foma’s isolated monasticism, an overlap framing the novels, published in quick succession in 1900-1901, as two halves of a larger story about the soul and faith in God. For Antipa, Foma, and other Russian Christians, steadfast belief leaves room in one's personality for a bit of the divine, even if that divinity wills believers to live in seclusion for the rest of their lives. Il’ia’s presence in the arc, on the other hand, depicts dramatically the emptying of wills both personal and supernatural. It is important to note that in *Three Men* Il’ia’s own agency is taken from him because he ignored the instructions of the divine voice inside him. This individual secularization did not occur in Il’ia in a day, and in fact there were multiple steps along the way. The one of the earliest and most significant moments in Il’ia’s process of losing faith was the death and subsequent robbery of Eremei, who was a spiritual advisor to the young boy. In fact one may even say that Eremei was Il’ia’s primary connection to God through Bible stories and moral preaching. When the two were talking immediately before Eremei’s death, the old man says, “My Lord! A raven flies, it can smell a bit [of money],” jokingly warning Il’ia about Terentii’s envy of Eremei’s money.[[109]](#footnote-110) This subtle reference to the ravens that God sent to test Elijah’s faith in order to perform miracles is another transposed symbol Gor’kii inverted.[[110]](#footnote-111) While Terentii purports to be a servant of God like the ravens, readers realize shortly after this moment he is another anti-Christ figure in Il’ia’s Russia. Once Eremei dies, Terentii and Petrukha steal his savings, which had been set aside for donations to the church. The act marks the intertwining of material wealth and God for good. The connection between the two manifests for the first time in Il’ia’s prayer for “everything [he] want[s]” in the world, as opposed to little Iakov’s prayer for the sake of prayer.[[111]](#footnote-112) Starting with this moment, Il’ia loses his faith in short succession and finally his life.

Il’ia’s estrangement from the divine in *Three Men* begins and concludes in a church. Feeling God within him gives rise to his primal instincts. He senses “something special, alarming, and contradictory to his dreams of a pure life” is watching after him and fights to suppress it.[[112]](#footnote-113) Il’ia is readjusting to a new set of guiding principles as the Christian worldview declines in significance for him. This new paradigm is unclear, but it is noticeably materially focused. When little Iakov asks Il’ia if he knows what God wants from him, “once again out of his mouth poured incoherent words.” Iakov tries to explain God with a metaphor of fire in a lamp that comes and goes but always hangs in the air, but Il’ia cannot imagine and does “not want to know” such a thing.[[113]](#footnote-114) The only thing he cares about, as he explains in an outburst at his friends Iakov and Masha, is “that you can’t stick your hand in it and nearby you can get warm.”[[114]](#footnote-115) Both of his concerns center around his physical experience above anything else. Yet when Il’ia is walking by the monastery grounds, we see that he has not quite yet lost his faith. In a scene similar to the death of Foma’s father, Il’ia’s finds himself in utter silence save the deafening ringing of a church bell, “the only movement in a deathly silence surrounding earth.” When Il’ia asks himself “who is leading him throughout life, who pushes all of its difficulties and struggles on him,” the “question flared up in Il’ia’s soul, ‘Is it you, Lord?’” In response, only “a cold horror sent shivers throughout his body.”[[115]](#footnote-116) As Judgment Day nears, Il’ia is frightened to be alone in silence with God and himself.

Once more like Foma, Il’ia’s faith declines in the background of a murder. There are important differences between the two, however, which again point toward *Three Men* being the apocalyptic conclusion of the Christian worldview in Gor’kii. First among the dissimilarities is that Il’ia’s murder was premeditated as opposed to Foma’s drunken negligence leading to the workers’ deaths. Here we see again how Gor’kii views the search for private wealth. Il’ia planned the murder of the pawn broker Poluektov, whom he strangles in order to rob him of cash and expensive goods.[[116]](#footnote-117) After Il’ia returns to his favorite bar, he sat in silence and “without thoughts, waited for what would come.” The other and arguably more important difference between Foma and Il’ia’s world is how other merchants react to their killings. Foma faced scrutiny, guilt, and ultimatums from Maiakin. In *Three Men*, Il’ia, whom the narrator begins calling by his family name, Lunev, receives jokes, congratulations, and pride after his murder-robbery. Society has forsaken its commandments with joy.

Gor’kii does not stop his criticism of the merchant class there. Lunev approaches the crowd and hears chatter among the townspeople. A merchant praises his inhumanity using Jesus’s words: “It’s the hand of God! As they say, all of the hairs on your head are numbered.”[[117]](#footnote-118) These words are said to Christian martyrs preparing for death to reassure them that God’s will bends toward justice. This is part of Jesus’s continuation of Elijah’s work to prepare the world for the eschaton, the end of time. By using such a quote in order to justify Il’ia’s killing of another person for gold and silver, Gor’kii highlights the depravity of the merchantry. This statement enlivens Lunev to such a point that he would fearlessly admit to the murder, so as to indicate the full dissolution of the Christian world.

Departure from old-world Russia and its Orthodox identity begins with separating from society spiritually, as Il’ia did. Among those around him, “a few lauded his dexterity and bravery, others regretted that he did not have time to take all the money, some were afraid he would get caught, and no one pitied the merchant [Poluektov], nobody said a good word about him,” Il’ia notes to himself.[[118]](#footnote-119) Despite the social boost, he is disgusted by their reactions and still expects God’s punishment at any moment. However, time passes, and Il’ia begins to question if he will ever be punished for what he did, which begins troubling him. This anxiety comes to a head when discussing alternatives to the Bible, “heretical” books that “explain the beginning of things,” Lunev becomes acutely frenetic and defensive.[[119]](#footnote-120) He screams, “God exists! He sees everything! Knows everything!” echoing Eremei.[[120]](#footnote-121) Iakov does not understand the reason for the outburst until Lunev uses the same quote the black-bearded merchant said: “All the hairs on your head are numbered! Have you heard? If I fell into sin, then it is [God’s] will! Idiot!”[[121]](#footnote-122) Thereafter he quickly unravels into madness. When talking to an investigator on Poluektov’s murder case at the police station, Lunev is preoccupied by a painting on the wall. He asks the detective for an explanation, which strikes him to his core: “It is a powerful visual aid... in order to show the discrepancy between our life and Christ’s teachings.”[[122]](#footnote-123) The police believe him during questioning and begin to suspect another of Poluektov’s clients for the murder. Lunev realizes that he can get away with the robbery and murder if he so desires, after which “he could only think about a single thing: how will he live?”[[123]](#footnote-124) Without the punishment he was expecting to deliver justice, the idea of God quickly becomes untenable to Lunev.

In the end, four words break Il’ia’s faith in God, hope for justice, and will to live. After speaking with Iakov, who had been his closest confidant before the conversation, Lunev is crestfallen in the meaninglessness he sees. Iakov’s willingness to let God’s will dictate his life leads Lunev to the conclusion that God, if truly watching all, “sees all [and] permits all,” which renders God irrelevant to humans.[[124]](#footnote-125) Justice is not guaranteed and therefore “a pig is looking for some luck, and a person all the more so, as they say.” This novel nihilism in Lunev reverberates throughout the rest of the novel. Back in the tavern he entertains others with jokes about his innocence despite his actions. He starts, “But there you have it, God asks you, ‘How did you live, human?’ And I will say, ‘Lord! I was born small, died drunk, and I don’t remember a thing!’ He’ll have a laugh and forgive me.”[[125]](#footnote-126) He mocks the ideas he previously values and casually brushes off what was previously his primary concern, and Gor’kii continues to strike at the stereotype of the two-faced believer. At church Lunev found personal comfort about what he had done, and “feeling unexpectedly well, he failed to understand and didn’t trust this feeling, but he sought within himself penitence and he did not find it.”[[126]](#footnote-127) Instead, Gor’kii adds, he worries he may not have hidden the money well enough, leaving it vulnerable to theft. Lunev declares his preferences and opens himself for criticism of valuing money over life. No longer is Lunev feeling God within himself with others or in church as before Poluektov’s murder, he is utterly alone in his own world.

Lunev’s world comes to an end at the after a long period of emptying himself of his past and present life. In conversations with Iakov and a hospital watchman, Lunev hears Job’s lamentations about God’s unfair treatment, though he can only repeat to himself, “Why did I live?” When the guard quotes Ecclesiastes 9:4, “For he who has fellowship with all the living has hope, for it is better to be a living dog than a dead lion,” Lunev rushes off as he is unable to come to terms with his growing isolation from God and the rest of society. Driven mad by guilt but unable to address rectify his transgression, he finally comes to terms with his new life without a meaning beyond himself. He reflects that “Had I not strangled the merchant, living would be a lot better now,” but then told himself, “What merchant? He’s a misfortune of mine, but not a sin...”[[127]](#footnote-128) Il’ia gives up not just being a good person, but he rejects good and evil as established concepts entirely. He makes this realization overlooking an expansive ravine adjacent to the Volga. Only the tiny flames of ships float in a black expanse. Gor’kii foregrounds the leitmotif of silent emptiness that has accompanied so much of his spiritual searching: “And not long before a bat crossed the twilight, dark thoughts and memories flashed in Il’ia's soul: they came and left without response, and the darkness became ever thicker in the soul.” The last thread on which his faith hung broke, and “his chest at this moment was full of cold nonchalance and melancholic emptiness, which he saw... where he once felt God.” Lunev has lost his faith in God, and where there was once hopes and dreams he has only a vacant space within himself.

Following that, Lunev tries to fit into merchant society, but he does not find much luck there either. After admitting his atheism to himself, he gathers money from investors to start his own shop. “Il’ia Lunev’s dream finally came true” when he became a merchant himself.[[128]](#footnote-129) He is unable to leave his past behind him, however, as reminders continually arise: he sees Poluektov in paintings, little Iakov comes to visit, and everyone in his new social circle is still plagued by the question of how to live. In the final scene of the novel, Lunev goes to court to support his friend, Faith [Vera], who has been arrested for prostitution. Asked to answer for her actions, her only response is that she “was not forced,” but she “simply wanted to get rich.”[[129]](#footnote-130) Enraged more than ever by her imprisonment, Lunev finally breaks down and confesses to the court that he killed Poluektov for money. It may be surmised that Lunev’s conscious finally got the better of him, though later he says to one of the guards who asks if it was his conscious that tortured him into confessing that he has no conscious.

Before Gor’kii draws away from the scene, he offers one final reminder. Namely, Lunev’s chest held a growing “emptiness, which was dark, cold, and in which, like a pale moon in an autumn sky, arose the cold question: ‘And what’s ahead?’ [*A chto dal’she?*]”[[130]](#footnote-131) (The name Lunev is from the Russian for “moon,” *luna*.) The moon, a lifeless surface that only is visible by reflecting its surroundings, here portends an answer incompatible with life. His final piece of internal dialogue asks, “And what now, Peter’s court?” referring to the Saint Peter, the heavenly judge of the fate of the deceased. In his last moments, a guard asks Lunev to swear to God he will not try to escape. He replies, “I don’t believe in God” and runs away, at which point the guards shoot and kill him, the shot ringing out through the black expanse of night.[[131]](#footnote-132) Readers are left with only the final image of a match, lit by one of the guardsmen over Lunev’s body, calling back to Iakov’s failed explanation of God. Gor’kii’s most antagonistically atheist moments still hold out the smallest of hopes for the divine righteousness that only God can provide, but one has to find the truth in silence of the secular world.

In both *Foma Gordeev* and *Three Men*, Gor’kii depicts the characters’ and Russia’s souls embattled by good, evil, and the question of what is to be done following the long nineteenth century. At stake is the personal feeling of righteousness and a national sense of purpose. As the novels progress, their plots and main characters are gradually consumed by the vacuum of hopelessness ubiquitous in turn-of-the-century Russia. Foma survives to live a long life in seclusion, having accidentally killed a pair of workers, though he never finds communion with his merchant milieu again. Il’ia of *Three Men* also takes a life, but his fellow Russian merchants celebrate his self-serving crime. The community around Il’ia encourages theft and murder as a rite of passage for young members of the merchantry. The Christological (or Pneumatological) concept of kenosis, once a practice to bring one’s actions in line with God’s will, ceases to invite the divine. For Russians like Foma and Il’ia, however, who were brought up in the Christian tradition, finding God in oneself is all but impossible in their contemporary society. The alternative, one’s personal will, leads to moral quagmires while navigating the zero-sum game of wealth accumulation. What then occurs in twentieth-century merchant characters with their first-century moral maxims is the hollowing of both moral and divine self, the result of which yields a cavernous moral abyss, such as where Il’ia finds himself at the end of *Three Men*. Though his life is over by the end of the novel, the rest of society lives to see another day, which raises the question of what happens to life, morality, and faith as time marches on into the vacuum.

Gor’kii’s thought experiment to answer this question is his first drama, *The Lower Depths* (1902). The work begins already in that moral chasm: “A basement, similar to a cave. The ceiling is heavy stone arches, smoky and with crumbling plaster.”[[132]](#footnote-133) This underworld is society’s dredges, picking up the worst of Foma and Il‘ia‘s world. However, there is no Maiakin or Eremei to teach keep alive the Christian tradition and advise those younger. As a consequences, moral questions no longer badger characters or entreat them to reconsider their decisions. Instead we are left with despair, decay, and disease as Gor’kii finally concedes the lost battle for theodicy. In the movement toward a post-Christian society, *The Lower Depths* plays a pivotal role in capturing the confusing chaos between an active Christian semiosphere and whatever is to take its place as the driving cultural dominant. The play does not mark the beginning of Gor’kii’s godseeking or godbuilding, but it does signal the start of a period dominated by the search for a replacement religion.

In a letterto Leonid Andreev dated December 23, 1901, Gor’kii himself connects truth, faith, and fullness: “Over the course of my life, I have pounded my fists on many truths [*istinam*] in order to find what is inside them, and they all rang like empty pots under the strike of my fists. Only faith is that truth which lets out a lively and full sound when struck.” Gor’kii goes on to tell Andreev that *Three Men* failed to properly ring true with his faith in the end.[[133]](#footnote-134) He would say that about his next major works as well, but he would keep trying to get closer to the truth provided by faith. The examined narratives are the search for the most sonorous spirituality, so to speak, up to this point. What started as playful transpositions of isolated pieces of the Christian tradition has become a trial against God. Gor’kii’s verdict on the theodicean question is clear: there is a God out there, but it is not the one from the Bible. The Christian God’s existence is simply incompatible with the state of humanity. Thus, the following chapters accompany Gor’kii on his search for a new force to call “God” that can satisfy his needs. He topples the Holy Trinity and revolutionizes the Holy Scriptures to find the truth right that was in front of him all this time.

1. Maksim Gor’kii, *Polnoe sobranie sochienii: Khudozhestvennye proizvedeniia v dvatsati piati tomakh*, 25 vols. (Moscow: Nauka, 1968, hereafter “PSS”), vol. 1, 377. “Я не знаю ничего лучше, сложнее, интереснее человека. Он — всё. Он создал даже бога. Искусство же есть только одно из высоких проявлений его творческого духа, и поэтому оно лишь часть человека.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Maksim Gor’kii, *M. Gor’kii o literature*, ed. I. Mikhailova (Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel’stvo Khudozhestvennoi Literatury, 1961), 405. “Пред человеком я потому «преклоняюсь», что, кроме воплощений его разума, его воображения, его домысла,- не чувствую и не вижу ничего в нашем мире. Бог есть такая же человечья выдумка, как, например, - «светопись», с той разницей, что «фотография» фиксирует действительно сущее, а бог - снимок с выдумки человека о себе самом как о существе, которое хочет - и может - быть всезнающим, всемогущим и совершенно справедливым.” [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Gor’kii, *M. Gor’kii o literature*, 488. “И если уж надобно говорить о «священном»,- так священно только недовольство человека самим собою и его стремление быть лучше, чем он есть; священна его ненависть ко всякому житейскому хламу, созданному им же самим; священно его желание уничтожить на земле зависть, жадность, преступления, болезни, войны и всякую вражду среди людей, священ его труд.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. A. M. Korokotina, “M. Gor’kii v sovetskoi kritike 20-x godov (Problema tvorcheskogo metoda),” in *Problemy metoda i genra*, vol. 7 (Izdatel’stvo tomskogo universiteta, 1980), 57-58. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Pavel Basinskii, *Gorʹkii*, 2nd ed. (Molodaia gvardiia, 2006), 180. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Barry P. Scherr, “Godbuilding Redux: The Religious Impulse in Gorky’s Childhood,” *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook* 2008/2009 (2009), 227-228. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. I.S. Uriupin, “Novozavetnyi tekst v rasskaze M. Gor’kogo «Delo s zastezhnikami» k voprosu o khristianskom gumanizme v tvorchestve pisatelia,” in *Maksim Gor’kii: Pro et Contra* (Saint Petersburg: Izdatel’stvo Russkoi khristianskoi gumanitarnoi akademii, 2018), 449-450. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. ` Ibid., 449. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. For example, Hans Günther, *Der Sozialistische Übermensch: M. Gor’kij und Der Sowjetische Heldenmythos* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1993); Barry P. Scherr, “Godbuilding Redux: The Religious Impulse in Gorky’s Childhood,” *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook* 2008/2009 (2009); Jutta Scherrer, “Maxim Gorky as Spokesman for Proletarian Humanism,” in *Stalin Era Intellectuals*, 1st Edition (London: Routledge, 2022), 136–55. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Irene Masing-Delic, *Abolishing Death: A Salvation Myth of Russian Twentieth-Century Literature* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1992), 124. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Lidiia Alekseevna Spiridonova, *Nastoiashchii Gor’kii: Mify i real’nost’* (IMLI RAN, 2013), 13-14; Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Indiana University Press, 1981), 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. Evgenii Nikitin, *Sem’ zhiznei Maksima Gor’kogo*, Imena (DEKOM, 2017), 13-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. Nikitin, *Sem zhiznei Maksima Gor’kogo*,15. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 15, 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. For example, Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 15, 85-86. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. E.g., Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 15, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. Scherr, “Godbuilding Redux,” 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. Lidiia Alekseevna Spiridonova, “Tvorchestvo Gor’kogo i vozniknovenie sotsialisticheskogo realizma,” ed. D. K. Bogatyrёv (Izdatel’stvo Russkoi khristianskoi gumanitarnoi akademii, 2018), 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 15, 70-71. “Вскоре я уже читал по складам Псалтырь; обыкновенно этим занимались после вечернего чая, и каждый раз я должен был прочитать псалом. -- Буки-люди-аз-ла-бла; живе-те-иже-же блаже; наш-ер-блажен, -- выговаривал я, водя указкой по странице, и от скуки спрашивал: -- Блажен муж, -- это дядя Яков? -- Вот я тресну тебя по затылку, ты и поймешь, кто блажен муж! -- сердито фыркая, говорил дед, но я чувствовал, что он сердится только по привычке, для порядка. И почти никогда не ошибался: через минуту дед, видимо, забыв обо мне, ворчал: -- Н-да, по игре да песням он -- царь Давид, а по делам -- Авессалом ядовит!” [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. Блажен муж, который не ходит на совет нечестивых и не стоит на пути грешных и не сидит в собрании развратителей, но в законе Господа воля его, и о законе Его размышляет он день и ночь! [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 15, 91. “Всяк, нарушающий непослушанием законы божии, наказан будет горем и погибелью! постукивая костями тонких пальцев по столу, внушал он. Мне было трудно поверить в жестокость бога. Я подозревал, что дед нарочно придумывает всё это, чтобы внушить мне страх не пред богом, а пред ним. И я откровенно спрашивал его: Это ты говоришь, чтобы я слушался тебя? А он так же откровенно отвечал: Ну, конешно! Ещё бы не слушался ты?!” [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
22. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 15, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
23. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
24. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 15, 88. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
25. Ibid. “Кабы всё-то знал, так бы многого, поди, люди-то не делали бы. Он, чай, батюшка, глядит-глядит с небеси-то на землю,— на всех нас, да в иную минуту как восплачет да как возрыдает: «Люди вы мои, люди, ми лые мои люди! Ох, как мне вас жалко!»” [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
26. Ibid. “С той поры ее бог стал еще ближе и понятней мне.” [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
27. M. S. Agurskii, “Velikii eretik (Gor’kii kak religioznyi myslitel’),” in *Maksim Gor’kii: Pro et contra*, ed. D. K. Bogatyrёv (Izdatel’stvo Russkoi khristianskoi gumanitarnoi akademii, 2018), 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
28. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 2, 512. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
29. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 1, 28. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
30. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 1, 30. “Знай, доколе Смерть живое губит, / Каину с Иудой нет прощенья. / Пусть их тот простит, чья сила может / Побороть навеки силу Смерти.” [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
31. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 1, 181. “В святочных рассказах издавна принято замора­живать ежегодно но нескольку бедных мальчиков и де­вочек. Мальчик или девочка порядочного святочного рассказа обыкновенно стоят перед окном какого-нибудь большого дома, любуются сквозь стекло елкой, горящей в роскошных комнатах, и затем замерзают, перечувство­вав много неприятного и горького.” [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
32. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 1, 188. “По моему мнению, крайне нелепо замораживать детей, которые имеют полную возможность погибнуть более просто и естественно.” [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
33. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 3, 493. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
34. Ivan Andreevich Esaulov, *Paskhal’nost’ russkoi slovesnosti* (Krug", 2004), 44-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
35. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 3, 500. “Да если б ты заморозил в одном из твоих рассказов всех бедных детей земного шара,— ты причинил бы этим только удовольствие твоим читателям. Они в шут­ку, быть может, назвали бы тебя Иродом, но, наверное, разочарованно вздыхали бы при мысли, что твой рас­сказ только фантазия.” [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
36. Mt. 2:1-18. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
37. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 3, 500. “Когда действительность людей не трогает и их души не оскорбляет своей суровой мукой и пошлостью,— твои ли фантазии облагородят человека? Ты ли пробудишь в нем сердце, рассказывая ему о замерзающих, уми­рающих с голода, о всех мрачных явлениях жизни, на которые всякий закрывает свои глаза, ища себе в жи­зни и покоя и довольства, заглушая свою совесть по­дачкой грошей. Море нищеты и несчастия просасывает­ся сквозь плотину бессердечия, и работе моря мешают тем, что бросают в него горошины... И ты надеешься?!” [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
38. Esaulov, *Paskhal’nost’ russkoi slovesnosti*, 44-45. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
39. Ibid., 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
40. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 2, 559. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
41. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 2, 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
42. Ibid., 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
43. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 2, 64. “Я и говорю ей: «Не могу я мужевать с тобой, Марья. Ты девка здоровая, я человек больной, хилый. И совсем я жениться не желал, а батюшка, мол, силком меня — женись, говорит, да и всё!...»” [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
44. V. B. Bezgin, *Pravovaia Kul’ture v Russkom Sele (Vtoraia Polovina XIX - Nachalo XX Vekov)* (Tambov: FBGOU BPO “TGTU,” 2012), 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
45. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 2, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
46. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 2, 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
47. Ibid., 69. “Свирепые вы люди! Уйду я! Навек уйду... Не в мочь мне... — Да уходи!..” [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
48. Judas’s kiss: Mt. 26:47-56; Mk. 14:43-52; Lk. 22:47-53; Jn 18:2-12; Prophecy and fulfillment about rooster crowing: Mt. 26:34, 26:74-75; Mk 14:30, 14:68-70; Lk. 22:34, 22:60-61; Jn. 13:38, 18:27. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
49. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 2, 73. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
50. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
51. Basinskii, *Gor’kii*, 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
52. Maksim Gor’kii, *O evreiakh* (Saint Petersburg: Petrogradskii Sovet Rabochiikh i Krasnoarmeiskikh Deputatov, 1919). “Я думаю, что еврейская мудрость более общечеловечна и общезначима, чем всякая иная.” [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
53. Ibid. “В ранней юности я прочитал—не помню где—слова древне-еврейского мудреца—Гиллеля, если не ошибаюсь: "Если ты не за себя, то кто же за тебя? Но если ты только для себя—зачем ты?" [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
54. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 4, 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
55. Maksim Gor’kii, *Revolutsiia i kul’tura* (Berlin: Tovarischeshtvo I. P. Ladyzhnikova, 1918), 36. “Равноправие евреев — одно из прекрасных достижений нашей революции. Признав еврея равноправным русскому, мы сняли с нашей совести позорное, кровавое и грязное пятно.” [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
56. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 4, 81. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
57. Ibid., 84. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
58. Ibid., 81-82. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
59. Ibid., 82. “Промзино — село Симбирской губ., откуда выходят на Волгу лучшие, то есть сильнейшие, крючники.” [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
60. Ibid., 82. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
61. Maksim Gor’kii, *O evreiakh.* “Одно из наиболее тяжких преступлений человека -- равнодушие, невнимание к судьбе ближнего своего; это равнодушие особенно свойственно нам.” [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
62. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 4, 78. “маленький юркий еврей, с острой головой, с желтым худым лицом” [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
63. Ibid., 78. “имя более знакомо людям, и в нем есть много оскорбительного” [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
64. Ibid. “всем казалось, что оно вполне точно рисует тело и душу еврея, в то же время обижая его” [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
65. Ibid., 78-79. “А обижать Каина было легко: когда над ним издевались, он только виновато улыбался и порой даже сам помогал смеяться над собой, как бы платя вперед своим обидчи­кам за право существовать среди них.” [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
66. “Shikhany,” Russian Geographical Society, May 31, 2017, <https://www.rgo.ru/ru/article/shihany>. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
67. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 4, 85. “— Подай-те, Хри-ста ра-ди, копе-ечку... си-ро-те одинокому... ни отца нету, ни матери... Странно и чуждо всему звучит в этой улице имя Христа.” [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
68. Ibid., 78. “Он жил среди людей, обиженных судьбой, а для них всегда приятно обидеть ближнего, и они умеют делать это, ибо пока только так они могут мстить за себя.” [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
69. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 4, 88-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
70. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 4, 91. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
71. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 4, 92. “Вы знаете, как хорошо мне жить? Вы знаете это, да? Разве — извините — я не терпел от вас по­боев? И разве вы не смеялись над пархатым жидом? Что? Это — правда? А! Вы извините мне мою правду, вы поклялись. Не сердитесь! Я только говорю, что вы, как и все люди, гоняли жида... За что, а? Разве жид не сын бога вашего и не один бог дал душу вам и ему?” [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
72. Ibid., 94. “Артем чувствовал, что понемногу ему становится лучше, тело ноет меньше и в голове яснее. Нужно заступиться за Каина пред людьми что, в самом деле? Вон он какой добрый и открытый,— прямо всё говорит, по душе. Подумав так, Артем вдруг улыбнулся давно уже его томило какое-то неопределенное желание, и вот теперь он понял его.” [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
73. Ibid., 97. “Каин не был? Должон скоро быть... Его время близко...” [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
74. Cf. Mt. 26:18, Lk. 21:8 for examples said by Christ and Rev. 1:3, 22:10 for warnings about Judgment Day. [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
75. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 4, 102. “Превосходно и великолепно поступил ты, Артем Михайлыч! говорил он, поглаживая бороду, Совсем по завету евангельскому... Как в притче о самарянине милосердном... Во гною и струпьях был Каин-то... А вот ты не побрезговал.” [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
76. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 4, 108. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
77. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
78. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 4, 109. “«Кто восстанет за меня против злобствующих? Кто постоит за меня против лиходеев?» тихо спросил еврей словами псалма.”; this is psalm 93 in the Septuagint and 94 in the Masoric version. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
79. Ibid., 110. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
80. Mt. 17:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
81. 2 Kings 2:11 [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
82. Rev. 2:13 [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
83. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 5, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
84. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 5, 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
85. Ibid., 182. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
86. Phil. 2:7. “но уничижил Себя Самого” [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
87. E.g., Margaret Ziolkowski, “Dostoevsky and the Kenotic Tradition,” in *Dostoevsky and the Christian Tradition*, ed. Diane Oenning Thompson and George Pattison, Cambridge Studies in Russian Literature (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 31–40; Benjamin Jens, “Silence and Confession in ‘The Brothers Karamazov,’” *The Russian Review* 75, no. 1 (2016): 51–66. [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
88. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 4, 201. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
89. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 4, 259. “И снова зрелую красоту сада обняло торжественное молчание. Ужас всё еще не исчезал из глаз Игната...” [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
90. Ibid., 260. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
91. Ibid., 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
92. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 5, 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
93. Ibid., 49-50. [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
94. Ibid., 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
95. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 5, 58. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
96. Ibid. “Илья подумал, что вот дедушка Еремей бога любил и потихоньку копил деньги. А дядя Терентий бога бо ится, но деньги украл. Все люди всегда как-то двоятся сами в себе. В грудях у них словно весы, и сердце их, как стрела весов, наклоняется то в одну, то в другую сторону, взвешивая тяжести хорошего и плохого.” [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
97. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 4, 336. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)
98. Ibid., 347-350. “«Что это со мной происходит? — думал он. — Кто я такой?»” [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
99. Ibid., 364. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
100. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 4, 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
101. Ibid., 359. [↑](#footnote-ref-102)
102. Ibid., 424:. “И, как видишь, счастье человека обусловлено его отношением к своему труду...” [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
103. Ibid., 424 .“— Всё — не по душе... Дела... труды... люди... Еже­ли, скажем, я вижу, что всё — обман... Не дело, а так себе — затычка... Пустоту души затыкаем... Одни ра­работают, другие только командуют и потеют... А полу­чают за это больше... Это зачем же так? а?” [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
104. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 4, 448. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
105. Ibid., 446. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
106. Ibid., 450. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
107. Ibid., 451. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
108. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 4, 458. “— Ну-ка, насчет светопреставления скажи слово, а? Хе-хе-хе! Про-орок!” [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
109. Gor’kii, PSS, vol. 5, 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
110. 3 Kings 17:6 [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
111. Ibid., 63. “А ты о чем хочешь молиться? Я о том, чтобы ум­ным быть... И еще — чтобы у меня всё было, чего за­хочу!.. А ты?” [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
112. Ibid., 97. “Оно пугливо скрывается где-то глубоко, оно безмолвно в суете жизни, но в церкви оно растет и вызывает что-то особенное, тре­вожное, противоречивое его мечтам о чистой жизни. В эти моменты ему всегда вспоминались рассказы об отшельнике Антипе и любовные речи тряпичника: «Господь всё видит, всему меру знает! Кроме его — никого!»” [↑](#footnote-ref-113)
113. Ibid., 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-114)
114. Ibid., 104. [↑](#footnote-ref-115)
115. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 5, 118. [↑](#footnote-ref-116)
116. Poluektov is a speaking name/voice, from AG πολύευκτος, “long-awaited, desired” (lit. much of what is desired). [↑](#footnote-ref-117)
117. Mt. 10:29-31, Lk 21:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-118)
118. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 5, 158-159. “Некоторые хвалили его ловкость и храбрость, иные сожалели о том, что он не успел взять всех денег, другие опасались, как бы он не попался, и никто не жалел купца, никто не сказал о нем доброго слова.” [↑](#footnote-ref-119)
119. Ibid., 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-120)
120. Ibid., 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-121)
121. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-122)
122. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 5, 161-162. “Мм... Это написано для вящей наглядности... для того, чтобы показать несоответствие между жизнью и учением Христа.” [↑](#footnote-ref-123)
123. Ibid., 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-124)
124. Ibid., 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-125)
125. Ibid., 182. “А я скажу: «Господи! Родился — мал, помер пьян,— ничего не помню!» Он посмеется да простит меня...” [↑](#footnote-ref-126)
126. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 5, 197. “Чувствуя себя так неожиданно хорошо, он недоу мевал, не верил ощущению своему, но искал в себе рас каяния и — не находил его.” [↑](#footnote-ref-127)
127. Ibid., 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-128)
128. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 5, 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-129)
129. Ibid., 302-303. [↑](#footnote-ref-130)
130. Ibid., 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-131)
131. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 5, 316. [↑](#footnote-ref-132)
132. Gor'kii, PSS, vol. 7, 109;. Подвал, похожий на пещеру. Потолок — тяжелые, каменные своды, закопченные, с обвалившейся штукатуркой. Свет — от зрителя и, сверху вниз,— из квадратного окна с правой стороны. [↑](#footnote-ref-133)
133. Gorʹkii, PSP, vol. 2, 229. “В течение жизни моей я стучал кулаками по многим истинам, чтобы узнать, что у них внутри, и все они звучали под ударами моими, как пустые горшки. Только вера — вот истина, дающая при ударе по ней звук живой и полный. В „Троих“ это не показано. Вообще — эта книжка — как вообще все мои крупные задачи — не удалась мне.” [↑](#footnote-ref-134)