

**Isaak Babel's Image of the Humanized Jew in the**  
*Odesskie rasskazy*

by  
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## Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Regan Treewater

## Abstract

The Russia in which Isaak Babel (1894-1940) wrote was one of deep seated anti-Semitic philosophies and prejudices, a place of *pogroms* and segregation. Literature of this era painted the Jew as a villainous, dishonest, and feeble minded foreign being within society. Traditionally, Russian literature used the Jew as a national scapegoat or a comical stock character ripe for ridicule.

Babel's contemporaries considered him to be a born writer with a gift for minimalism without the sacrifice of vivid description. His was an evocative style of brutal humanism, showing both character flaws and character virtues. The *Odesskie rasskazy* (Odessa Tales) epitomized this honest approach to human portrayal. The Jewish community of the *Odesskie rasskazy* boasted a variety of characters from all walks of life, rejecting the previously perpetuated stereotype.

The Jew, as shown by Pushkin, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Gogol, and Chekhov, was simply a caricature. Such characters were restricted to the role of the fool, the thief, and the opportunist. When Babel first described the community, people, and culture of his native *shtetl*, the previous stereotype of the Russian Jew became an antiquated relic of the past.

This thesis will explore some examples of earlier depiction of Jews in literature and the humanized image of Russian Jewry that Babel created in his *Odesskie rasskazy*. The analysis will discuss how these depictions created a new, three dimensional characterization of the Jew.

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Dedication

For my Mom and Dad

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### **A Note on Transliteration**

This thesis will use the Library of Congress system of transliteration from the Cyrillic to Latin alphabet. Alternate spellings of names and places will only be used when quoting directly. For names that have widely accepted spellings in English e.g. Trotsky, Dostoyevsky, Romanoff, these equivalents will be used.

## **Introduction: Isaak Emmanuilovich Babel and His Legacy**

He was no opponent of the Soviet system but he served his own talent rather than the authorities. Babel's real crime was his artistic independence. (Shentalinsky 25)

How did Isaak Babel's depictions of Odessa's Jewry differ from the previous descriptions of Jews found in Russian literature? This thesis will examine the characterization of Jews in Babel's *Odesskie rasskazy* and how these representations resulted in the humanizing of Babel's Jewish characters.

Stereotyping, in sociological terms, is a method of categorizing a group with certain features and characteristics. Some would argue that stereotyping is inevitable and to a degree, necessary. At the very least it provides a rough concept by which a person can begin to understand something alien to themselves. The stereotype of the Eastern European Jew still survives today, cursed with a protruding nose, a greedy money hungry nature, and legendary frugality. Fundamentally these unflattering generalizations have changed very little since the time of the Tsars. In Imperial Russia the Jewish community was ostracized, and the view of Jews as outsiders, and even as foreigners, persisted into Soviet times.

What is the humanized Jew? The humanized Jew is a detailed depiction of the entire character without bias of generalizations. He or she does not assume the stereotypical Jewish role of clown or criminal, but is a person of many facets, with emotions, aspirations, morals, dilemmas, and vices, the whole package. The Jewish identity is but one layer, and does not define the character's entire being.



The dehumanization of outsiders or one's enemies has been a key element in conflict and war throughout history. In war, dehumanization of the enemy is a vital component of the justification needed to kill.

We typically think that all people have some basic human rights that should not be violated. Innocent people should not be murdered, raped, or tortured.

Dehumanization is a psychological process whereby one group is considered as less than human and thus not deserving of moral consideration. Those excluded are typically viewed as inferior, evil, or criminal. Any harm that befalls such individuals seems warranted, and perhaps even morally justified.

Dehumanization makes the violation of generally accepted norms of behaviour regarding one's fellow man seem reasonable, or even necessary.

Psychologically, it is necessary to categorize one's enemy as sub-human in order to legitimize increased violence or justify the violation of basic human rights. Moral exclusion reduces restraints against harming or exploiting certain groups of people. (Maiese)

In nineteenth-century Russian literature, the Jew was dehumanized, regarded as sub-human and undeserving of basic human rights. By stereotyping the Jew, groups throughout history have justified hatred and unspeakable violence. Even now in post-Soviet Russia, such sentiments have taken on a terrifying form in the Slavophil philosophies of such organizations as the National Socialist Party, as well as other skin-head groups.

Isaak Babel<sup>1</sup> (1894-1940) once said, “I too often feel the weight of the centuries of my people’s ancient culture, and it suffocates me” (Babel, *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* dedication page). And indeed this “ancient culture” may have felt stifling to Babel as he strove to establish himself in a gentile dominated Russia. More than any other aspect of his character, this culture was the muse which inspired the entirety of his canon. Babel once told his second wife, Antonia Pirozhkova, that in fact none of his stories contained autobiographical elements or personal narrative (Pirozhkova 1: 7). Despite this claim, nearly all Babel scholars would argue that his work is saturated with his own history and experiences in a Jewish *shtetl*.<sup>2</sup> Cynthia Ozick, a literary scholar and Babel expert who wrote the introduction to his complete works, makes the apt comparison between intentional and unintentional autobiography. She cites Da Vinci and his much-debated self portrait in the Mona Lisa (Ozick, *Metaphor and Memory* 97). Efraim Sicher, a Jewish studies scholar, echoed this sentiment in his essay “Midrash and History: A Key to the Babelesque Imagination” when he said: “Isaak Babel was a notorious hoaxer who enjoyed mystifying in real life, and in his fiction” (215).

Isaak Emmanuilovich Bobel (Исаак Эммануилович Бобель) was born on the 30<sup>th</sup> of June 1894 (June 1<sup>st</sup> Old Style) within the oppressive, and ultimately inspirational walls of Moldavanka (Молдаванка), the Jewish quarter of Odessa (Одесса), to Emmanuil and Feiga Bobel. His father made a modest living as a merchant of agricultural machinery and was a strong believer in the teachings of the Torah.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this thesis the more common spelling of the author’s last name “Babel” will be used instead of “Babel”.

<sup>2</sup> A derivative of the Yiddish word for town, a *shtetl* is a small community, usually segregated from society, with an almost exclusively Jewish population.

Emmanuel Bobel had never enjoyed steady success as a businessman and throughout his life struggled with mild depression and deep seated feelings of inadequacy.<sup>3</sup> In his more morose moments he turned to writing. True to his nature, he never found his work worthy of readership and would go on tirades of frustration, destroying his own manuscripts. As Babel's father had not had the benefits of a thorough education, he was adamant that his children would not know the same fate. For this reason both Isaak and his younger sister Miriam received the most comprehensive and extensive of educations. The family would later change their surname from Bobel' (Бобель) to Babel' (Бабель). The name Babel expresses more of an Ashkenazi derivation, and is perhaps a reference to the Tower of Babel.

To understand his works, it is vital to fully understand the man behind them. Young Babel split his childhood between Odessa and the nearby suburb of Nikolaev, about 150 kilometres outside the city. In 1905, with the ratification of a constitutional monarchy as outlined in the October Manifesto, Nicholas II orchestrated vicious *pogroms*<sup>4</sup> throughout the southern regions of the empire. This included Nikolaev where Babel's family resided at the time. The family survived the violence by seeking refuge, hiding in the attic of Christian neighbours who denounced the hostility against Jews as unchristian. This time of his childhood would later inspire Babel's short story "V

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<sup>3</sup> Babel's life and family history come from the works of Carden, Hallet, and Mendelson.

<sup>4</sup> "The Russian word meaning 'pillage' but in this case it describes a mob action either conducted by the Tsarist authorities or with their tacit consent, calculated to ruin or exterminate the Jews." (Israel ix)

podvale” (In the Basement 1929)<sup>5</sup>, which appeared in *Novyi mir* (New World) in October, 1931. Babel’s grandfather was the only casualty of the family during the murderous campaign. The death of his grandfather played a graphic role in “Istoriia moei golubiatni” (The Story of My Dovecote), which was published first in *Krasnaia gazeta* (Red Newspaper) in 1925.

Like Babel’s elderly grandfather, thousands of innocent people perished in the *pogroms*, their only crime being their Jewish heritage. But when tensions had subsided the Babel family returned to Odessa. Although the mass murders had ceased for the time being, anti-Semitic sentiment still persisted and Jews still experienced quotas and restrictions on employment, housing, education, and rations. Once the family had re-established themselves, this time in the city centre, attempts to enrol young Isaak in school were thwarted by limitations on the number of Jewish children allowed to matriculate. Thus Isaak was schooled at home by private tutors. Ironically, his education proved superior to that of the government schools. He received instruction in music and German as well as Talmudic studies. However, it was his education in French language and literature which captured Babel’s interests most and inspired his early efforts to write creatively. The first stories he ever put to paper were thus not written in his native Yiddish, or even Russian, but in French at the age of only fifteen. According to Babel, he destroyed these works. Babel’s good friend Il’ia Ehrenburg would one day write:

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<sup>5</sup> “In the Basement” was published originally in the book *The Story of My Dovecote* (1925) which consisted of four short stories detailing the experiences of a young narrator during the *pogroms* of the early century.

I often discussed with Babel. Passionate and in love with life, involved in it at every minute, he had been devoted to art from his childhood. It sometimes happened like this: a man has an important experience, he wants to relate it, it turns out he does it with talent, and a new writer is born. (70)

In Ehrenburg's perception, the primary goal of Babel's writing was not the poetics of form, but the content and substance being communicated. Babel began writing to convey events and ideas; a straight-forward style of minimalism which he maintained from his early school boy days onward.

His earliest works would seem, in spite of his cryptic protests, to stem from his own adolescence. This unique time in Babel's life appears to have been portrayed in his short work "Detstvo u babushki" ("At Grandmother's"), which was dated 12 November 1915, and published later the same year. In this story a young student eagerly awaits his private French lesson and it is clear that French excites him. Babel himself most probably experienced this same excitement. He was enamoured with the writings of Guy de Maupassant (1850-1893). It is indisputable that Maupassant influenced, inspired, and coloured much of Babel's thinking and many of his approaches toward literature. Isaak Babel's unique method of narrative changed very little during his career. He experimented with several different genres, but was consistent in his emulation of Maupassant's form of direct communication. Many have even claimed that Babel's style echoes a distinctly French influence. Babel idolized the French writer so profoundly that he wrote the short story "Guy de Maupassant" (1932), a story satirizing the affluent Jewish upper class that had abandoned their traditions for

the bourgeois culture of the Russian intelligentsia. Some have even referred to the rise of Babel's career as the coming of the second Maupassant, or in some cases to Babel himself as the Odessan Maupassant, a comparison which no doubt would have flattered even Babel's subdued ego.

Maupassant has been credited with helping to develop the modern genre of short fiction as a protégé of French novelist Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880), for whom Babel also had much admiration. Flaubert is most celebrated for his first novel, *Madame Bovary* (1857), which began Flaubert's lifelong search for what he called "*le mot juste*" (the exact word). It was from Flaubert that Maupassant adopted his economic style of literary directness. Babel integrated this style of minimalism and *le mot juste* into Russian literature.

In 1913 Babel officially published his first short story "Staryi Shloime"<sup>6</sup> ("Old Shloime"), the graphic tale of a pitiful old man's wretched existence and subsequent suicide. This story was a direct response to the conversion of many Jews to Russian Orthodoxy in order to evade persecution. Shloime, the protagonist, preferred death over his son's abandonment of Judaism. Fittingly, Babel's final work, "Evreika" ("The Jewess" 1969), which remained unfinished, embodied similar themes of assimilation.

While still attending university Babel was introduced to the daughter of one of his father's business associates in Kiev, Boris Gronfein. Babel was quickly charmed by Gronfein's artistically inclined daughter Evgeniia. The two bonded over a fascination

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<sup>6</sup> Shloime is a bastardization of the Hebrew word used for greetings and farewells, *Shalom*, meaning peace be with you. The derivation of Shloime's name from a word with such connotations would seem to suggest a mangling or complete lack of peace.

with Western culture and philosophy, and further discovered that what unified them was their belief in honesty in artistic form:

She no doubt took his Tolstoyan refusal to wear a coat in the thick of winter to be a passing bohemian fad, and his embarrassing tendency to gobble cream cakes in public might have seemed far less shocking than the behaviour of avant-garde artists who dressed and behaved to shock public taste. But later it became apparent how incompatible was Babel's mischievous humour, his love of secrecy and of wandering, with her love of art and of comfort. (Sicher, *Jews in Russian Literature after the October Revolution* 77)<sup>7</sup>

Following graduation from university in 1916, Babel hoped to start his writing career in the centre of Russian art and culture, in the city of the Tsars. Despite mandated restrictions to maintain a small Jewish population, he moved illegally to the majestic city of Petrograd in defiance. "Babel's need to escape the stunted aspects of his Jewish upbringing steered him towards the voyaging invisibility of exile" (Stine 234). It was here that he first met Maksim Gorkii<sup>8</sup> (1868-1936) and began to publish short works in *Letopis* (Chronicle) which Gorkii edited. He once said, "I owe everything to that first meeting and still pronounce Aleksey Maksimovich Gorky's name with love and admiration" (Babel, *Isaac Babel; The Lonely Years 1925-1939* 113). Gorkii himself

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted with errors.

<sup>8</sup> The spelling of the name Maksim Gorkii, is the Library of Congress transliteration, but his name is also commonly spelled Gorky. He was born Aleksei Maksimovich Peshkov (Алексей Максимович Пешков), but later wrote under the *nom de plume* Maksim Gorkii, meaning bitter.

had long been passionate about improving the lot of Russia's Jewry, and saw in Babel the style and artistic voice with which to introduce gentile society to a foreign culture which existed within their own borders. But Babel was still young, and inexperienced, having seen little of the world. Gorkii urged an impressionable and eager Isaak Babel to go and live life before putting pen to paper.

It was during this time that Babel began to associate with his contemporaries and socialize in far more politically radical circles. He formed lasting friendships with such influential figures as Il'ia Ehrenburg<sup>9</sup> (1891-1967), who would continue to follow and critique Babel's career throughout his life. He also befriended literary critic and publisher Aleksandr Vronskii (1884-1937) a member of the *Proletkult*,<sup>10</sup> who would be killed in the Stalinist purges for his association to Trotsky. This would later bring Babel's own activities into question.

As Russia made its dramatic metamorphosis, transitioning into a socialist government, Babel joined the *Cheka*, the secret police, as a translator. Babel was linguistically gifted and spoke French, Yiddish, and Russian fluently, as well as English and German to varying degrees. Later in life, he would also learn to speak Polish while serving with the Red Army in the Russo-Polish War (February 1919 - March 1921).

Ironically, the NKVD, formerly the Cheka, would carry out his execution.

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<sup>9</sup> The common spelling of Илья in the Latin alphabet is Ilya, but the transliterated form is Il'ia.

<sup>10</sup> The term *Proletkult* is a compound Russian term Proletarskaia kul'tura (пролетарская культура) meaning proletariat culture. This movement existed predominantly in the early years of the Soviet Union and aimed to define a Socialist culture which rejected the decadence of Imperialism and the perceived frivolity of the bourgeoisie.



After returning to Odessa to marry his first wife Evgeniia Gronfein, Babel was certified as a war correspondent and deployed to Budenyi's Cavalry.<sup>11</sup> He concealed his Jewish heritage and went by the name Kiril Liutov. For much of his life, Babel had been dazzled by tales of the very people who participated in Ukraine's earliest *pogroms*, the Cossacks: "The conflict between Cossack and Jew is apparent to even the most casual of readers" (Borenstein 73). For Babel, who had always been a meek and asthmatic child, the Cossacks epitomized the most skilled and impressive warriors within Russia. Thus, an assignment along with a genuine unit on the front lines was a realization of his romanticized childhood fantasies and nightmares. This dramatic chapter of Babel's life provided ample material and experience to inspire his *Konarmia* (*Red Cavalry Stories* 1926). This cycle of thirty-four short tales follows an unassuming and timid Jewish journalist, Liutov, along his harrowing journey with the Red Cavalry, much like Babel's own experiences. The style of these stories is journalistic; choppy, brief, and to the point, focusing on the vital information and discarding the superfluous. These would ultimately be Babel's most gruesome and violently haunting works. The collection was translated into English, French, Spanish, Italian, and German. Babel's idolization of Cossacks would also be a paradoxical feature of his many eccentricities which would fuel much scholarly conjecture. Lionel Trilling described this puzzling incongruity by stating:

There was anomaly at the very heart of the book for the Red cavalry of the title were Cossack regiments, and why were Cossacks fighting for the Revolution,

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<sup>11</sup> Semen Mikhailovich Budennyi Семен Михайлович Буденный (1883-1973) was a military commander in the Soviet Army.

they who were the instrument and symbol of Tsarist repression? The author who represented himself in the stories was a Jew; and a Jew in a Cossack regiment was more than an anomaly, it was a joke, for between Cossacks and Jews there existed not merely hatred, but polar opposition. (Trilling 120)

After the end of the Civil War, Babel returned to his native Odessa where he composed the cycle of stories *Odesskie rasskazy*, which include: “Korol” (“The King” 1921), “Kak eto delalos' v Odesse” (“How It Was Done in Odessa” 1923), “Otets,” (“The Father” 1924), and finally “Liubka Kazak” (“Liubka the Cossak” 1924). It was in 1923 that the stories of the character, Benia Krik, began to take form. These stories were composed in the wake of Babel’s father’s death, as Babel himself was making a living with minor editorial work. *Odesskie rasskazy* (*Odessa Tales*) provided outsiders with a unique and dramatic portrait of life within the closed community of Moldavanka, the Jewish ghetto. Gentile society perceived Jews only through stereotypes, but with the circulation of such stories as “How It Was Done in Odessa“ the image of Russian Jewry, which up to that point had been a mere caricature, began to gain depth. It is precisely this new image of the Russian Jew that this thesis will explore:

The first Jewish authors writing in Russia – Lev Lavanda, Grigori Bogrov and Osip Rabinovich – were, in essence, pleaders of their people’s cause appealing to the Gentile world for understanding and compassion. None of these pioneers was remotely accepted in his time by the Russian public as an authentic Russian author. (Friedberg, “The Jewish Search in Russian Literature” 95)

Babel however, found acceptance, and would go on to write more short stories, plays, and even film scripts.

But with the onset of Socialist Realism in 1932 and the oppression of Stalin, writers throughout the Soviet Union were put under close scrutiny. “I am the author of a new literary genre, the genre of silence”<sup>12</sup> Babel once was quoted as saying.

The most important consequence, however, of the 1932 change was the decision of the Kremlin to formulate its own literary doctrine, partly on the suggestion of Gorky, partly as developed by Stalin and the Communist leaders. This was the so-called “socialist realism” which derived from the concept that art is a reflection of reality and therefore has to be realistic, and that the only realism that should bloom in the land of Soviets was that permeated by the spirit of Communism. (Slonim 160)

It became clear to Babel and his peers that artistic freedom was now a thing of the past. Only that which celebrated the party would be tolerated or survive government censorship. Virtually over night, any expression that deviated from the mandates of Socialist Realism became a lofty and dangerous pursuit. Babel was no stranger to government scrutiny and till the end of his life would write mostly in secret.

Babel’s legacy in Russian short fiction is indisputable. He pioneered a new style of humanism all his own, celebrating the hideous in lieu of romanticizing it, and in

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<sup>12</sup> Excerpt from a speech Babel gave at the 1934 Congress of Soviet Writers (Babel, *The Collected Stories of Isaak Babel*, 498)

doing so presented the first honest portrait of Russian-Jewish culture. Where there had been only stereotypes, there was now a sense of culture and tradition, bringing humanism to the literary portraiture of Jews.

Previous scholars of Jewish characterization in the stories of Isaak Babel include Vladimir Khazan of Jerusalem's Hebrew University, and Gabriella Safran of Stanford University. Khazan focuses on the portrait of the Jew in Babel's *Konarmia*. He draws comparison between Jewish and non-Jewish intertextuality as narrated by Liutov, a Jew concealing his identity in a Cossack unit. Safran discusses and coins the term "new Jewish type" regarding Babel's depiction of Il'ia Isaakovich in *Il'ia Isaakovich and Margarita Prokof'evna* (1916). Her work focuses on how Babel approaches Jewish portraiture from a positive angle.

This thesis will discuss elements of literary portraiture in terms of three key factors; physicality, character actions and internal elements of Babel's characterization techniques. This analysis will refer to *Psychonarratology: Foundations for the Empirical Study of Literary Response* (2003) by Marisa Bortolussi. In this work, Bortolussi coins the term psychonarratology and outlines her methods of literary deconstruction as it applies to the internal narrative. Although the *Odesskie rasskazy* contain little internal narration, Babel's characters do manifest their psychology through other avenues, namely their actions and what is said about them. Bortolussi's publication provides a key link between the introspective character and the narration of action. Additionally the text *Companion to Narrative Theory* edited by Peter J. Rabinowitz (2005) analyzes the various angles of narrative, both externally and internally.

Attention will also be paid to the literary traditions of Babel's generation. *Soviet Literary Structuralism* (1983) by Peter Seyffert, *Through the Glass of Soviet Literature* (1953) a collection of essays edited by Ernest J. Simmons, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic* (1992) by French literary historian Régine Robin, and finally Robert A. Maguire's *Red Virgin Soil: Soviet Literature in the 1920s* (1968) will be used to provide a context for the literary climate and trends of the world in which Babel wrote.

Purely historical material regarding this era is extensive. There is a plethora of English and Russian language sources to which refer to. Such titles include, *Jews in the Soviet Union* (1951) by Solomon M. Schwarz, *The Jews in Russia* (1975) written in French by Gérard Israel and translated into English by Sanford Chernoff, *The Jews in Soviet Russia 1917* (1970) by Lionel Kochan, *Stalin: A Critical Survey of Bolshevism* (1939) by Boris Souvarine, *A History of Jewish Education in the Soviet Union* (1971) by Elias Schulman, and *Odessa* (1957) written by S. Kovbaksiuk.

The foremost Babel scholars today in North America are Gregory Freidin and Maurice Friedberg. Freidin, whose primary concentration is on the life and impact of Isaak Babel, worked closely with Babel's daughter Nathalie Babel, Cynthia Ozick and Peter Constantine on the 2002 publication of Babel's collected works. Friedberg is more focused on questioning the role of Jews in literature, and the influence of Babel's own cultural upbringing on his work.

There is limited but specific scholarship on the culture of Odessa with detailed commentary and analysis on the criminal world of Moldavanka. In one chapter of Rachel Rubin's book, *Jewish Gangsters in Modern Literature* (2000), she deals

exclusively with Benia Krik, the king of the Odessan underworld, a character created in the image of Misha Iaponchik, a real life gangster of that era. One publication, written in Russian, does explore the historical influences of Babel's literary interpretation, *Kto takoi Misha Iaponchik* (1994) by A. Kravets. Along with these, a recent publication by Roshanna Sylvester, *Tales of Old Odessa: Crime and Criminality in the City of Thieves* (2005) will also serve to establish a framework for Odessa's sinister underbelly.

An examination of the Russian perception of Jews is essential. The Russian word *zhid* (жид) will be analyzed using the work of Slavic scholar Felix Dreizin in his work *The Russian Soul and the Jew. Essays in Literary Ethnoscriticism* (1990). Dreizin's work is further elaborated on by Sascha Goluboff in *Upheavals in a Moscow Synagogue* (2003). Both scholars discuss the use of the derogatory slur "zhid". The hate expressed in this vulgar word, used so freely, is a key point in Vadim Rossman's book *Russian Intellectual Antisemitism in the Post-Communist Era* (2002). To support his theories on the legacy of Russian Jewish anti-Semitism through stereotyping Rossman cites psychologist Lev Vygotsky's *Nachalo puti* (1996).

Source material in Russian regarding Babel and the genre of Russian-Jewish literature includes such works as *Zhizneopisanie Babelia Isaaka Emmanuilovicha* (1993) by Polish scholar Czeslaw Andruszko, *Russko-evreiskaia literatura* (1972) by V. Rogachevskii, *Literatura revoliutsionnogo desiatiletia 1917-1927* (1929) by A. Lezhnev, and additionally *Russkie evrei vchera i segodnia* (7422 Hebrew calendar, 1975 Gregorian calendar) by I. Domal'skii. Andruszko's book deals with the connection of life experience and story telling in Babel's narrative style. *Russko-evreiskaia literatura* focuses on the unique cultural elements found in Russian

literature, and will be used in tandem with *Russkie evrei vchera i segodnia* to relate the historical and the literary.

Victor Erlich's compilation of essays on literary criticism, *Twentieth Century Russian Literary Criticism* (1975), Eliot Borenstein's *Men Without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction 1917-1927* (2000), as well as Marc Slonim's *Soviet Russian Literature: Writers and Problems* (1964) will be taken into consideration for theories of literary analysis previously applied to Babel's works.

Since most scholars tend to focus on Babel's *Konarmii*, little secondary material has been published on the cycle of *Odesskie rasskazy*. This thesis will explore literary portraiture in *Odesskie rasskazy* and how this formed the image of the humanized Jew. There is a cornucopia of characters in his *Odesskie rasskazy* "cynical bums, pious rabbis, eccentric coachmen, and sly merchants" (Slonim 72), whose seedy, individual portraits form a broad picture or rather, a colourful mosaic of Moldavanka's Jewish community. This mosaic will be contrasted with the earlier depictions of Jews in literature. Along with excessively grotesque imagery, such as the accentuation of deformities, heinous features, and maladies, to illustrate the human form, Babel's minimalism of language serves to create the specificity of *le mot juste*.

The thesis will consist of three main chapters. The first chapter will be an exploration of the social and literary context, what led Babel to write these stories. The second chapter will be an introduction to the literary portraiture and the tools that will be used for analysis. The third chapter will first present examples of Jewish portraiture in nineteenth-century Russian literature, then the *Odesskie rasskazy* and its portraiture

of Jewish characters as compared to the earlier literature. Finally, this chapter will interpret the image of the humanized Jew as shown by Isaak Babel.

By first establishing a historical and social understanding of Babel's era, his concept of the new humanized Jew will become apparent through contrasting his three-dimensional characters with the superficial image perpetuated through anti-Semitism. His depiction of life within the *shtetl* walls was hardly idealized, nor demonized, yet through his work he set in motion the creation of a new literary image of Jews.



## Chapter I: Babel's Experiences as a Writer in an Anti-Semitic Era

New life is being injected into the old Jewish body. More important, however, is the creation of a new body altogether. Alongside of new Soviet culture there is also being created a new Jewish culture. Nowhere is this birth of the new Jew as pronounced as in the new Soviet art, literature, and the theatre. (Dennen 141)

The Russia in which Isaak Babel began his fledgling career was one of political turbulence and social instability. The proletariat was growing increasingly discontent, the gap between themselves and their bourgeois counterparts expanding. In the midst of increasing polarity were the ghettoized Jews, isolated and oppressed, living under stifling administrative and social restrictions. People simply lay in wait for the next onslaught of outlandish and often inhumane anti-Jewish policies to be handed down by Russian officials. From the first *pogroms* sanctioned by the Tsar in the 1870s to the eradication of an estimated 1.5 million Soviet Jews by the Nazi regime, campaigns of violence followed one after another (Israel x).

Most Russian Jews resided in the south western territories, as did Babel's family, in what is present day Ukraine. The concentration of Russia's Jews in this specific region was the result of the partitioning of Poland between 1772 and 1795. Although some territories were partitioned to the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, most of Poland's Jewry lived in the lands annexed to Russia. Communities of displaced Jews developed in the northeast of Ukraine as well as in Odessa along the Black Sea.

According to Maurice Friedberg, during the Tsarist years following the abolition of serfdom and leading up to the official emancipation of Russia's Jewry in March of 1917 and the Revolution, Russia's population of Jews was greater than

anywhere else in the world (Friedberg, *How Things Were Done in Odessa* 93). Even as freed serfs spread throughout the country, Jews were still prohibited from residing within Moscow, or other major centers:

Throughout the history of the Jews under Tsarist rule, legislative and administrative restrictions slowed down or stopped completely the integration of Jewish masses in the economy. Scarcely any of the conditions of Jewish life even remotely approached normality. (Schwarz 9)

Like the majority of Russian Jews, Babel spoke Yiddish as his mother tongue. In 1897, 90.6% of Jews born in the Russian Empire were Yiddish speaking (Schwarz 13). To facilitate their education, regions with large Yiddish speaking communities provided schooling in Yiddish. After the Ukrainian nationalist movement took hold of the country, both Ukrainian and Russian were declared official languages and Yiddish schools were required to also teach Ukrainian or Russian. By 1926, the percentage of Yiddish speaking Jews had declined to 70% of the Soviet Jews, and only slightly higher in the Ukraine (Schwarz 17). In the early 1930s less emphasis was given to providing education to minority groups in their native language, and the Yiddish schools began to dwindle in number (Schulman 19). Legislation gradually tightened restrictions on matriculation of Jews in schools and universities. It was virtually impossible to attend Russian institutions of learning, as Babel himself would experience at all levels.

In 1871, Odessa was the site of the first recorded *pogrom* in the Russian Empire, and this was the beginning of a phase of anti-Semitism in the country. Raging anti-Semitism multiplied exponentially. Ten years later in 1881, during Russian

Orthodox Easter and the Jewish high holiday of Passover (*Pesach*), an unprecedented 224 *pogroms* were inflicted upon Russia's Jews. The aggressors were locals, Cossacks, as well as itinerant Greek merchants whose main competitors for business were the Jewish merchants. In 1905, the *pogroms* of Babel's childhood were even more violent and heartless than their predecessors. Over 690 independent *pogroms* intent on destroying Jewish lives took place during this single year (Israel 30). This rendered the *shtetls* uninhabitable, but the laws still prohibited Jews from leaving. After the bloodshed had subsided, these victims were forced to remain confined within the boundaries of their own agony. The result was the cultivation of a culture of suffering. Babel himself would capture in vivid and sometimes unbearably honest detail the essence of this tormented culture:

She also said other things about our seed, but I no longer heard anything. I lay on the ground, the innards of the crushed bird trickling down the side of my face. They trickled, winding and dribbling, down my cheek, blinding me. The dove's tender entrails slithered over my forehead and I closed my uncaked eyes so that I would not see the world unravel before me. This world was small and ugly. A pebble lay in front of my eyes, a pebble dented like the face of an old woman with a large jaw. A piece of string lay near it and a clump of feathers, still breathing. My world was small and ugly. I closed my eyes so I wouldn't see it, and pressed myself against the earth that lay soothing and mute beneath me. This tamped earth did not resemble anything in our lives. Somewhere far away disaster rode across it on a large horse, but the sound of its hooves grew

weaker, and vanished, and silence, the bitter silence that can descend on children in times of misfortune, dissolved the boundary between my body and the unmoving earth. The earth smelled of damp depths, of tombs, of flowers. I breathed in its scent and cried without the slightest fear. (Babel, “The Story of My Dovecote” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 373)<sup>13</sup>

Despite Babel’s adamant assertions that nothing of his own life ever made its way into his work, “The Story of My Dovecote” describes a murder that is almost identical to that of his grandfather’s during the onset of the 1905 *pogrom*.

In his 1926 journal article, “Babel': Pechat' i revoliutsiia,” Abram Lezhnev, an historical and literary critic wrote regarding the legacy of Isaak Babel:

Babel' is the first Jew to enter Russian literature as a Russian writer, at least the first prose writer. Up until now we only had Jewish writers attached to Russian literature. Their work was interesting for the reader curious about the

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<sup>13</sup> Она еще сказала о нашем семени, но я ничего не слышал больше. Я лежал на земле, и внутренности раздавленной птицы стекали с моего виска. Они текли вдоль щек, извиваясь, брызгая и ослепляя меня. Голубиная нежная кишка ползла по моему лбу, и я закрывал последний незалепленный глаз, чтобы не видеть мира, расстилавшегося передо мной. Мир этот был мал и ужасен. Камешек лежал перед глазами, камешек, выщербленный, как лицо старухи с большой челюстью, обрывок бечевки валялся неподалеку и пучок перьев, еще дышавших. Мир мой был мал и ужасен. Я закрыл глаза, чтобы не видеть его, и прижался к земле, лежавшей подо мной в успокоительной немноте. Утоптанная эта земля ни в чем не была похожа на нашу жизнь и на ожидание экзаменов в нашей жизни. Где-то далеко по ней ездил беда на большой лошади, но шум копыт слабел, пропадал, и тишина, горькая тишина, поражающая иногда детей в несчастье, истребила вдруг границу между моим телом и никуда не двигавшейся землей. Земля пахла сырными недрами, могилой, цветами. Я услышал ее запах и заплакал без всякого страха.

ethnographic details rather than the art. It is only in Babel's hands that the life of the Jews of Odessa has acquired aesthetic value. The *Odesskie rasskazy* and "The Story of My Dovecote" prove that he is capable of transcending the limitations of anecdotal and ethnographic tendencies.<sup>14</sup> (Lezhnev, "Babel" 85)<sup>15</sup>

Babel managed to capture the essence of the historical era of which he wrote. Lezhnev valued literary truth of form over psychological realism, which is perhaps why Babel appealed to him so strongly. Lezhnev felt that a writer could easily become lost in the labyrinth of psychological character and neglect conflict, which Lezhnev regarded as the key factor in narrative (Maguire 272). Babel's narrative style represented the antithesis of the much celebrated poetic prose produced during the nineteenth-century Golden Age of Russian literature. In essence, this directness of narration gave his work universality.

The *Proletkult* strove to reinvent the standards of Russian literature into a purely Soviet mould. Where once Pushkin had embodied the virtually unattainable ideals of prosaic and poetic perfection, modern thinkers like Lezhnev and Voronskii pushed for a literary rejection of the ornamental romanticism and supported the minimalist humanist realism of authors like Babel. Babel stated: "my reputation for literary 'independence'

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<sup>14</sup> Translated from the Russian by Gregory Freidin.

<sup>15</sup> Бабель - первый еврей, вошедший в русскую литературу, как русский писатель. До тех пор имелись лишь еврейские писатели при русской литературе. Несмотря на весь свой талант, он представлял для читателя больше интерес этнографический-бытовой, чем художественный. Только в руках Бабеля одесский быт приобретает художественную ценность. Как это ни странно покажется на первый взгляд, но именно Бабель, несмотря на то, что формально все его Одесские рассказы представляют собой хорошо рассказанные анекдоты, быть может, единственный из изобразителей еврейского быта вышел за пределы анекдота. (Lezhnev 85)

and as a ‘fighter for quality’ attracted those who were inclined towards formalism” (Babel, qtd. in Shentalinsky 31).<sup>16</sup>

“Quand Babel' se tourne vers son enfance en 1925, puis en 1930, il y retrouve cette même image du Juif souffrant qu'il avait décrit au debut de sa carrière” (Stora-Sandor 94).<sup>17</sup> Judith Stora-Sandor explains that the appearance of Babel’s archetypal, tormented Jew is a recurring theme. This is certainly symptomatic of the poverty he observed and experienced within Moldavanka. “Life in Odessa was harder than in most cities of comparable size” (Friedberg, *How Things Were Done in Odessa* 3). Despite its cultural and historical significance, the Soviet government considered Odessa a “low priority” according to Friedberg. The city and its population received little economic assistance. Friedberg states that the lack of funds resulted in severe housing shortages, especially in the *shtetl*. Surviving homelessness, hunger, and despair, the *shtetl* dwellers acquired a culture of suffering. Babel could only imagine a better world:

I was a boy who told lies. This came from reading. My imagination was always aroused. I read during class, between classes, on my way home, and under the table at night, hidden by the table cloth that hung down to the floor. Reading books, I missed out on everything the world around me had to offer: skipping classes to go to the port, the coming of billiards to the coffee shops along Grecheskaya Street, swimming at Langeron. I had no friends. Who

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<sup>16</sup> This is an excerpt taken from an interrogation conducted in the Lubianka during the summer of 1939. In the entirety of the statement Babel is making, he is clearly acquiescing to the authorities.

<sup>17</sup> In 1925, and again in 1930, Babel turned to his childhood memories for images of the ever suffering Jew, which had characterized the early years of his career (translated from French).

would have wanted to spend time with someone like me? One day I saw the brightest student in our class, Mark Borgman, with a book about Spinoza. He had just read it and was dying to tell the boys around him about the Spanish Inquisition. What he told them was nothing but scientific prattle. There was no poetry in Borgman's words. I could not stop myself from cutting in. To whoever would listen, I talked about old Amsterdam, about the gloom of the ghetto, about the philosopher diamond cutters. I added quite a lot of spice to what I had read in books. I couldn't resist. My imagination sharpened dramatic scenes, altered endings, steeped the beginnings in more mystery (Babel, "In The Basement" *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 399)<sup>18</sup>

The 1920s in the Soviet Union proved a time of extremes, instability, and ultimately a futile struggle to establish some modicum of balance. Isaak Babel recalled this time in his country's history with nostalgia:

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<sup>18</sup> Я был лживый мальчик. Это происходило от чтения. Воображение мое всегда было воспламенено. Я читал во время уроков, на переменах, по дороге домой, ночью – под столом, закрывшись свисавшей до пола скатертью. За книгой я проморгал все дела мира сего – бегство с уроков в порт, начало бильярдной игры в кофейнях на Греческой улице, плавание на Ланжероне. У меня не было товарищей. Кому была охота водиться с таким человеком? Однажды в руках первого нашего ученика, Марка Боргмана, я увидел книгу о Спинозе. Он только что прочитал ее и не утерпел, чтобы не сообщить окружившим его мальчикам об испанской инквизиции. Это было ученое бормотание – то, что он рассказывал. В словах Боргмана не было поэзии. Я не выдержал и вмешался. Тем, кто хотел меня слушать, я рассказал о старом Амстердаме, о сумраке гетто, о философах – гранильщиках алмазов. К прочитанному в книгах было прибавлено много своего. Без этого я не обходился. Воображение мое усиливало драматические сцены, переиначивало концы, таинственнее завязывало начала. ("V podvale" *Odesskie rasskazy* 160)

What did we talk about over a cup of tea? We told each other penitent tales about the old departed Russia in which, alongside the bad, there had been much that was good. Sentimentally we recalled the onion domes of the monasteries and the idyll of the small provincial towns. Even the Tsarist prisons were depicted in positive, sometimes moving terms, and the jailors and secret policemen of the day appeared in these stories to be slightly odd, not at all bad kinds of people. The Revolution was condemned for the mortal sin of underestimating so-called good men. (Babel, qtd. in Shentalinsky 32)<sup>19</sup>

The first decade of Soviet rule was perhaps the greatest era of universal change and transformation that Babel and his contemporaries would experience in their lifetimes. There was nothing gradual about this metamorphosis, and writers of this generation did not lack subject matter. It was only that their creative voices would be quickly silenced.

The height of the Stalinist Terror was in 1937 and 1938. Abruptly roused from sleep on 15 May 1939, Isaak Babel was arrested at his *dacha* (cottage) in Peredelkino, not far outside Moscow, by the secret police (NKVD), and was interrogated ruthlessly. He was accused of anti Soviet activities, treason, and espionage. His association with Voronskii, and Voronskii's social connection to Trotsky brought immediate suspicion.

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<sup>19</sup> О чем говорилось за стаканом чаю? Перепевались покаянные рассказы о старой, ушедшей России, в которой наряду с плохим было так много прекрасного, с умилением вспоминали монастырские луковки, идиллию уездных городов; царская тюрьма – и та изображалась в легких, иногда трогательных тонах, а тюремщики и жандармы выглядели по этим рассказам чуть вывихнутыми неплохими людьми. Недооценка так называемых хороших людей (Babel, qtd. Shentalinskii *Raby Svobody* 37).



The NKVD was wary of any contact with the west, and Babel's time abroad, visiting his mother and sister in Brussels, and first wife and daughter in Paris (1932-1933, and again in 1935), was seen as an act of subversion, and calculated conspiracy against the Soviet Union. Babel's interrogation was comprehensive and spanned several excruciating months. His accusers did all they could to extinguish his sense of humanity:

The arrested man was left no opportunity to take his own life. The procedure had been minutely thought out and planned. By stripping the individual of each last item that still linked him to everyday life and his family they rendered him insignificant and helpless. What was an unshaven and unwashed man, in ill fitting lace-less shoes and falling trousers, against the might of the all-powerful state. (Babel, qtd. in Shentalinsky 23)

Despite the physical brutality and psychological manipulation, Babel ardently kept his wits about him for quite some time and even exhibited his classic dark humour. His interrogation transcript states that the only crime to which he was prepared to confess was his self-declared inability to write:

I consider my arrest the result of a fateful coincidence and of my own inability to write. During the past few years I have not published a single major work

and this might be considered sabotage and an unwillingness to write under Soviet conditions. (Babel, qtd. in Shentalinsky 24)<sup>20</sup>

Nine boxes full of manuscripts, folders of letters, and even unfinished sketches, essentially everything they could find, were confiscated. These documents would be reviewed for any hint of incriminating evidence. Isaak Babel's innocence or guilt was an inconsequential matter as far as the NKVD was concerned. He was now seen as an enemy of the Soviet Union, and evidence against him would be obtained at any cost. Interrogation methods were so heinous that in the end authorities could get a man to confess to absolutely anything. Vsevolod Meyerhold (1874-1940)<sup>21</sup> details these techniques vividly in a letter written from inside the Lubianka prison to Viacheslav Molotov (1890-1986):<sup>22</sup>

When I lay down on the cot and fell asleep, after 18 hours of interrogation in order to go back in one hour's time for more, I was woken up by my own groaning and because I was jerking around like a patient in the last stages of

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<sup>20</sup> Я считаю свой арест результатом рокового стечения обстоятельств и следствием моей творческой бесплодности, в результате которой в печати за последние годы не появилось ни одного достаточно значительного моего произведения, что могло быть расценено как саботаж и нежелание писать о советских условиях. (Babel, qtd. in Shantelinskii *Raby Svobody* 29)

<sup>21</sup> Meyerhold, Всеволод Эмильевич Мейерхольд, was a theatre director who was celebrated and later condemned for the experimental nature of his work. He was an original member of the Moscow Art Theatre, and performed in their debut production, Anton Chekhov's *Chaika* (*Чайка* *The Seagull*).

<sup>22</sup> Viacheslav Molotov Вячеслав Михайлович Молотов was the Chairman of the Council of the People's Commissars under Stalin. He is also the namesake of the Molotov cocktail used against their neighbours to the north during the Russian Finnish War.

typhoid fever. Fright arouses terror, and terror forces us to find some means of self-defence. “Death, oh most certainly death is easier than this,” the interrogated person says to himself. I began to incriminate myself in the hope that this, at least, would lead quickly to the scaffold. (Meyerhold, qtd. in Shentalinsky 25-26)<sup>23</sup>

The interrogators who questioned Vsevolod Meyerhold were the same NKVD officers who interviewed Isaak Babel. No doubt similar methods were carried out on him, although such details were not recorded in Babel’s interrogation files. Just as Meyerhold indicated in his account, Babel too began to confess to crimes he did not commit.

Although Babel would confess his guilt in an act of desperation, implicating members of his social circle in the process, he would later write letters to the authorities recanting his earlier accusations. He pleaded for leniency on their behalf, knowing full well what fate would await them within the walls of the Lubyanka. Isaak Babel was executed at the Lubyanka on 27 January 1940. His family was not informed of his death, and for many years would not learn of Babel’s fate.

After his arrest and subsequent execution, Babel’s works would no longer be published in the Soviet Union. Only after Stalin’s death in 1953, and Khrushchev’s

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<sup>23</sup> Когда я лег на койку и заснул, с тем чтобы через час опять идти на допрос, который длился перед этим восемнадцать часов, я проснулся, разбуженный своим стоном и тем, что меня подбрасывало на койке, так как это бывает с больными, погибающими от горячки. Испуг вызывает страх, а страх вынуждает к самозащите. “Смерть (о, конечно!), смерть легче этого!” – говорит себе подследственный. Сказал себе это и я. И я пустил в ход самооговоры в надежде, что они-то и приведут меня и на эшафот. (Meyerhold, qtd. Shentalinskii, *Raby Svobody* 30-31)

renunciation of Stalinism, would Babel's words be seen again, and even then exclusively in censored forms. Any person who exercised the slightest iota of creativity or personal conviction was treading on thin ice during this time. The environment in which Babel wrote was not one of freedom, all the more dangerous for him to practise his innovative and unconventional style.

## Chapter II: Analytical Approaches

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands,  
organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the  
same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same  
diseases, heal'd by the same means, warm'd and cool'd by the  
same winter and summer, as a Christian is? If you prick us, do  
we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison  
us, do we not die? And if you wrong us, do we not revenge? If  
we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that.  
(Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* 3.1 302)

Here Shylock poses the rhetorical question of what makes him different from any of his peers. As he so eloquently concludes in one of Shakespeare's more famous monologues, there is nothing defining this divide. So what is it in Babel's work which creates his unique characterizations? Babel's characters possess the most peculiar of attributes. In discussing such elements of description it is necessary to also define the parameters of analysis. This chapter will delve into the theory of literary portraiture.

Literary portraiture is essentially the construction of image and character identity through description. Literary theoretician Ernst Behler explores the relation of artistic character portrayal and the inevitable influence of the autobiographical in an article titled "What It Means to Understand an Author Better than He Understands Himself: Idealistic Philosophy and Romantic Hermeneutics." Behler's primary focus is hermeneutics, the science of interpretation originally applied to religious scripture. Hermeneutics can be regarded as an approach to literary interpretation. Behler refers to the need for complete information, the physical and cerebral, for this interpretation to occur:

Just as during the process of understanding our mind becomes confounded by the dilemma of the parts' relation to the whole, so does a conflict between introspection and observation of external nature arise – both are necessary to full comprehension. (Behler 72)

Behler asserts the necessity of both the psychological and the physical in narrative. True to life these two aspects are separate, yet interrelated. Emphasis placed predominantly on one over the other is yet another method of character development. Behler would certainly agree that all minutiae in narrative have communicative value. The question of understanding physical character becomes an exercise in deciphering an author's perception of physical communication. Physical attributes are commonly the product of internal character traits in literature. All physical elements communicate character and personality, the external a direct result of the internal. Behler's theories state that environmental factors and individual life experiences can be detected visually. The absence of the description of a character's psychology does not in fact neglect this aspect, rather the vivid description of physicality can yield the same result. To illustrate, a person will appear older than their chronological age given that they have led a physically strenuous life. Conversely, a person without the blemishes of labour, one who appears unmarred, and carefree, has probably led a life without toil and hardship. This may also indicate that such a person is wealthy, or otherwise fortunate. Literary narrative can be as effective with the depiction of such things as long as the author does this in a thorough and thoughtful manner. When this is done well, it is

neither necessary nor effective to additionally state what has already been established through alternate means.

Throughout Russian literature predating Babel, the stereotypical distinction given to Jewish characters was almost exclusively a prominent nose. As offensive as stereotyping is, the universality of its utilization and its recognition is indisputable. And thus Jewish characters throughout literature would forever be cursed with this identifier.

Behler suggests that the creation of character is dependent on the external, but that physicality is not the only outer medium (Behler 73). It is as simple as what the character says, and the interpretation of what the character says, that is significant. First there is the language that the narrator employs towards the character, and secondly the language style that the characters themselves use. The latter is more descriptive in terms of creating the literary portrait. Language use and implementation suggest social class, education, and other idiosyncrasies. Word choice also establishes an historic base. In the original Russian, Babel's works are evocative in their word choice, a feature that is somewhat lost in translation.

Without question, all works will hold a bit of the author within them, and thus capture a moment in time. Historical literary critics primarily concern their readings of texts on what can be extrapolated from narrative, which yields significance in terms of its era. In a study of Babel's unique depictions of *shtetl* culture, it is especially vital to consider the social and historical angle. "History cannot deal with total stasis, it presumes that something is happening and that one part of the something is connected somehow with another" (Adams 25). History is related to society, and society in turn

to culture, making the circumstances of Babel's life and work a key point of the interpretation and analysis.

Literary discourse theoretician Marisa Bortolussi coined the term psychonarratology: "the investigation of mental processes and representations corresponding to the textual features and structure of narrative" (Bortolussi 24). Personality traits that are not immediately apparent can be communicated through psychonarratology. As Richard Walsh explains in "The Pragmatics of Narrative Fictionality", it is crucial how the reader perceives and interprets details presented from within the character's mind, as this, in theory, is the most honest perspective that the author can provide (Rabinowitz 150).

Analyzing Babel's characters in *Odesskie rasskazy* on three different levels of portraiture, one can begin to interpret the whole personality. On the primary level, there is Babel's most often used method, that of physicality. On the secondary level, there is verbalization, what the character says, and dialectical word choice, although this would be best analyzed in the original Russian. The third level is the character's history, experiences, and internal thoughts. Finally, when all these aspects are considered in concert with one another, one can begin the task of interpreting, of extracting meaning from the author's creation.

Babel's style, although seemingly simplistic, is deceptively complex. According to Andruszko, Babel's narrative gift lay in minimalism, and minimalism continues to be the most difficult of the literary forms for an author to maintain with any consistency (Andruszko 71). It is this literary minimalism in depicting a culture of



suffering which has ensured that the few but poignant words that Babel left behind still survive.

### Chapter III: Babel's Image of the Humanized Jew

Odessa is a horrible town. It's common knowledge...And yet I feel there are quite a few good things one can say about this important town, the most charming city of the Russian Empire. If you think about it, it is a town where you can live free and easy. Half the population is made up of Jews, and Jews are a people who have learned a few simple truths along the way. Jews get married so as not to be alone, love so as to live through the centuries, hoard money so they can buy houses and give their wives astrakhan jackets, love children because, let's face it, it's good and important to love one's children.<sup>24</sup> (Babel, "Odessa" *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 71)

Nineteenth-century Russian literature exhibited little understanding or sympathy for Jewish characters. They were stereotypically cast as money lenders or pawn brokers in minor roles. These characters served as convenient scapegoats, comical relief, or heartless criminals greedy for wealth:

Nationalistic Jewish writers have repeatedly noted a certain anti-Semitic tradition in Russian literature from Pushkin to Chekhov. Some of them have been puzzled by the fact, as it seems to them, that Russian literature, so generally humanitarian in its aims and ideals, has singled out only Jews for portrayal as either ludicrous or repulsive stereotypes. (Levin 13)

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<sup>24</sup> Одесса очень скверный город. Это всем известно...Мне же кажется, что можно много сказать хорошего об этом значительном и очаровательнейшем городе в Российской империи. Подумайте – город, в котором легко жить, в котором ясно жить. Половину населения его составляют евреи, а евреи – это народ, который несколько очень простых вещей очень хорошо затвердил. Они женятся для того, чтобы не быть одинокими, любят для того, чтобы жить в веках, копят деньги для того, чтобы иметь дома и дарить женам каракулевые жакеты, чадолюбивы потому, что это же очень хорошо и нужно – любить своих детей (Babel, "Odessa," *Odesskie rasskazy* 69).

In Alexander Pushkin's "The Covetous Knight" ("Skupoi rytsar" 1830) the Jewish character Solomon is treated with contempt. When Solomon claims that he has no money to lend, Albert proclaims:

You thief!/ If I myself had funds, do you believe/ I'd have the slightest  
intercourse with you?/ Be not so obdurate, friend Solomon./ Release your gold./  
A hundred you can spare./ I'll have you searched. (Pushkin 308)

Albert calls Solomon a thief because he will not give him a loan. Despite the fact that he is making a request of Solomon, he claims that if he had a choice, he would not associate with him, yet calls him friend. He would go so far as to search him, and take any money by force. Solomon is complicit in this. He neither stands up for himself, nor rebukes Albert for his hypocrisy. This is typical of the second class status of Jews in literature of this time.

In his forward to his translation of Rogachevskii's *A History of Russian Jewish Literature*, Arthur Levin remarks on the satirical portraiture of Jews in Russian literature. An example of such satire can be found in Anton Chekhov's "Ward No. 6" ("Palata nomer 6" 1892). The Jewish character Moiseika has been committed to an asylum. He is described as "a quiet, harmless half-wit, a town fool, whom people have long been used to seeing in the streets surrounded by boys and dogs. In a flimsy robe, ridiculous night cap and slippers, sometimes barefoot and even without trousers" (Chekhov "Ward No. 6" 172-173). Moiseika plays the role of the clown. He is

depicted as ridiculous and laughable, sometimes without even his pants. Even though he is kind and good natured, this too is shown in a negative light:

Moiseika likes to oblige. He brings his comrades water, covers them up when they sleep, promises to bring each of them a little kopek from outside and to make them new hats. He also feeds his neighbor on the left, a paralytic, with a spoon. He acts this way not out of compassion, nor from any humane considerations, but imitating and involuntarily submitting to Gromov, his neighbor on the right. (Chekhov, "Ward No. 6" 173)

Moiseika treats his fellow patients gently but this goes unappreciated. These actions are not even of his own accord, but he is simply copying human behaviour.

The typical Jew in the literature of this time has red hair, a bald spot in place where a yarmulke would be, and a large crooked nose. They are depicted as awkward in appearance and movement, and are always dressed poorly. They are characterized as exceedingly greedy and cunning. As Chekhov states:

The swing-door squeaked, and on the threshold appeared a shortish young Jew with a large beaky nose, coarse curly carrot hair and a bald place on top; he wore a short very shabby jacket with rounded folds and abbreviated sleeves, so, with his short woven trousers as well, he presented the appearance of a tailless fledgling. (Chekhov, "The Steppe" 27)

Chekhov touches on the major aspects of physicality that distinguish the Jewish stereotype. Even if the character is not expressly said to be a Jew, his description identifies him as such.

Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev<sup>25</sup> (1818-1883) also made a spectacle of the Jew in his short story “The Jew” (“Zhid” 1846). In this story Nikolai Il'ich, an officer in the Russian Imperial Army is deployed to the west. He meets a Jew and describes him as follows:

This Jew, Hirschel by name, was constantly haunting our camp, intruding himself on the agents, furnishing us with wine, edibles, and other trifles; he was small of stature, thin, pock-marked, and red haired; he was incessantly winking his tiny eyes, which were also red; he had a long crooked nose, and was eternally coughing. (Turgenev 4-5)

The name Hirschel is a reference to Hershel of Ostropol, a Yiddish folk hero. This folk hero is a prankster and is the master of trickery and deception, targeting the rich. Turgenev's use of the name automatically establishes his Jew as untrustworthy. By pretending to sell his daughter Sara to Nikolai, Hirschel and Sara extort money from the soldier. Hirschel is eventually hanged for spying, and meets his death with cowardice trying to bargain for his life till the bitter end.

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<sup>25</sup> The commonly accepted transliteration in English is Turgenev, although the translation by Isabel Hapgood (used in this thesis) spells it in the French style of transliteration “Turgénieff”.

Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881) also utilized Jewish stereotypes in *The House of the Dead* (*Zapiski iz mertvogo doma* 1861). The story is the tale of life in a Siberian prison. Dostoevsky himself spent four years in a forced labour camp in the Russian Far East. The Jew in this novel is a jeweller, a stereotypical Jewish occupation. Within the prison walls he also is a pawn broker, and is described comically:

Isay Fomitch, our Jew, was the very image of a plucked chicken. He was a man about fifty, short and weakly built, cunning and at the same time decidedly stupid. He was impudent and conceited, and at the same time awfully cowardly. He was covered all over with wrinkles, and on his forehead and each cheek bore the marks of having been branded on the scaffold. (Dostoevsky 61)

He is liked by his fellow prisoners, but is still seen as foolish. He makes a spectacle of Sabbath rituals for their amusement. He is most concerned with acceptance and is eager to please.

Nikolai Gogol (1809 - 1852) perpetuated the image of the greedy Jew in *Taras Bul'ba* (1835). This character, Zhid Yankel, is a tavern keeper who “managed to get all the surrounding Polish landowners and noblemen under his thumb, sucking them dry of all their money and firmly establishing his Jewish presence” (Gogol 118). He is so hungry for gold that even when Taras, a man who has saved his life, comes to ask for a favour, Yankel sees an opportunity for profit by delivering him to the Polish authorities:

He turned to spit one last time, as is the custom in his faith, when he saw Bulba out of the corner of his eye. The first thing that flashed through the Jew's mind were the two thousand gold ducats on Bulba's head, but he felt shame at his greed and struggled to stifle his eternal craving for gold, which like a serpent encircles the soul of every Jew. (Gogol 118)

Zhid Yankel's name itself screams of anti-Semitism. His first name, Zhid, a derogatory Russian term for Jew, is, even today, considered vulgar and offensive. The surname Yankel is a typically Jewish last name, and its combination with the first name Zhid completes the stereotyping of the character. In his book *Jewish Russians: Upheavals in a Moscow Synagogue*, Sascha Goluboff elaborates on the applications of the racial slur *zhid* (жид).

In Russian, the word *zhid* (kike) means both "JEW" and "stingy," and the slang verb *zhidit'sia* means "to be stingy" and to "show stinginess," like the English slang "to Jew" (Dreizin 1990:3). For example, according to Felix Dreizin (1990:28), Nikolai Gogol's book *Taras Bulba*, published in the mid-1880s, portrays Jews as "humanistically inferior not because of what they do... but because of who they are." Pathological greed and the pursuit of gold are presented as the main moving force of the Jewish nation as a whole. Jewish men are ugly and dirty. Jews do not know what loyalty and ideals are. [The Jew] is motivated by bourgeois individualism. (Goluboff 86)

As both Goluboff and Dreizin attest, there is nothing benign about the use of the word *zhid*. It is derived from the word Jew, whereas, the preferred term is *evrei* (еврей) a derivative of the word Hebrew.

Bernard Choseed, a literary historian, remarks on the role of the Jew in Russian literature. “Even the ‘good’ Jew like Gogol’s *Zhid* Iankel in *Taras Bul’ba* and Isai Fomich Bumshtein in Dostoevsky’s *House of the Dead* combined the qualities of the clown and the vulture” (Choseed, ed. Simmons 110). Babel, unlike his predecessors, moves in the direction of three-dimensional characterization. An historian of Russian Jewry, Vadim Rossman, quotes psychologist Lev Vygotsky in his analysis of the Jewish stereotype:

Evidence is abundant of the hostile attitude in many works of Russian literature. Lev Vygotsky, a well-known Russian psychologist, has argued: “The future historian of the Jews in Russia will be puzzled by the attitude of Russian literature to the Jew (*zhid*). It is both strange and incomprehensible that Russian literature being so much informed by the principles of humanity brought so little humanity to its portrayal of the Jews. The artists have never noticed a human being in a Jew. Hence, the lifeless mechanicism of the puppet, the ridiculous movements and gestures of which are supposed to make a reader laugh, the stamped cliché of a Jew, has replaced the artistic image. Hence, the similarity and even complete identity of the images of a Jew is always and everywhere a reincarnation of the vile, dark, groveling, greediness, infamy, filthiness, the



embodiment of human vices in general and the specific ethnic vices in particular (usury, spy, traitor)...” (Rossman 64)

Babel focused on the humanity of his characters, both their depravities and virtues. From a historical perspective if one looks back on Babel’s *Odesskie rasskazy*, one is introduced to a community of Jewish characters. Before Babel, Jews were relegated to supporting roles as either villain or fool:

Both the Russian and Yiddish versions saw the Jew as a separate being, set apart from society on the whole, and both regarded his attempts to transcend national stigmata and enter into the more open arena of modern life as a tragic problem, or as a matter for ridicule and contempt. (Chosed, ed. Simmons 111)

In Babel’s works these roles were reversed, and Jewish characters took the spotlight. Traditional categories established by centuries of literary caricature still presented themselves in a secondary peripheral form. But instead of the Jewish moneylender, or the provider of comic relief, Babel’s characters were gangsters.

Babel’s relationship with his modest origins was bittersweet. His depictions of Odessa are unflatteringly honest, and this is the dominant backdrop for the bulk of his work. He found his cultural upbringing in the *shtetl* stifling, yet Odessa moulded him. The dynamic characters that colour his *Odesskie rasskazy* are neither virtuous, nor does Babel idealize their existence. He treats his characters with acceptance, including their flaws, just as he does Odessa.

Odessa boasts a rich artistic and creative history, which rivals those of Europe's great capitals. Modern Odessa was established officially in 1794 by Catherine the Great (1729-1796) as a strategic port city on the site of what once was a bustling colony of the Ancient Greeks. Odessa is full of famous beaches, cobblestone streets, and grapevines mingling with decorative façades, but just beyond the railway station lies the *shtetle* of Moldavanka. During Babel's time this was one of the largest Jewish communities in the Slavic world.

Odessa plays a role in the majority of Babel's stories, in his *Odesskie rasskazy*, "Korol" ("The King" 1921), "Kak eto delalos' v Odesse" ("How It Was Done in Odessa" 1923), "Otets" ("The Father" 1924), and "Liubka Kazak" ("Liubka the Cossack" 1924), Babel paints Moldavanka as a maternal figure, as if it were an integral character alongside its gangsters and beggars. "Basya from Tulchin saw life in Moldavanka, our generous mother, a life crowded with suckling babies, drying rags, and conjugal nights, filled with big city chic and soldierly tirelessness" (Babel, "The Father" *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 163). Although there would be later additions to the Odessa cycle, "Spravedlivost' v skobkakh" ("Justice In Parenthesis" 1921), "Froim Grach" (1963),<sup>26</sup> "Konets bogadel'ni" ("End of the Almshouse" 1932), and finally "Zakat" ("Sunset" 1963),<sup>27</sup> the original compilation of the *Odesskie rasskazy* consisted of these primary stories.<sup>28</sup> Within the four part saga, and with the subsequent additions, the seedy underworld of Moldavanka comes to life through the

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<sup>26</sup> "Froim Grach" was published posthumously, and after his subsequent rehabilitation.

<sup>27</sup> "Zakat" was published in its original form in 1963, without the final page of the text, this page has never been located.

<sup>28</sup> Later additions to *Odesskie rasskazy* focused on post revolutionary Odessa, and followed the actions of supporting characters from the original cycle.

colourful and eccentric characters born of Babel's memory and imagination. The thread that ties these vignettes together is notorious gangster Benia Krik, the king.<sup>29</sup> He is referred to as king for his status, wealth, and influence he achieves through his less than legal dealings.

There is an old Yiddish saying, "when a gentile is a thief, they hang the thief. When a Jew is a thief, they hang the Jew." The tales about Benia Krik and his entourage are Odessan legend. Unlike the money hungry or farcical Jews of yesterday, Babel's gangsters were communicating elements of the many aspects of human nature. Benia is analogous to the godfather of Moldavanka, and his misdeeds and criminal activities take on a distorted sense of moral and ethical significance. For example in "The King" he extorts money, only to return his ill gotten gains, and in "Justice in Parenthesis" provides for the medical care of Tsudechkis, a man he has beaten for double-crossing him. The character of Benia Krik was based on an Odessan by the name of Misha Iaponchik, who organized Moldavanka against the Tsar's *pogroms* and was later martyred fighting against the White Army (Voronskii 196; Kravets 134). Aleksandr Voronskii comments:

The "King" himself is a bizarre combination of bourgeois respectability, bandit daring, amazing resourcefulness and cleverness. Even here Babel' remains true to himself. In the bandit Benia he uncovers a truth-seeker, indeed one who bleeds for the working class. Beneath the bandit's historic mask, the misdeeds and robberies as well as the thoroughgoing philistinism, he discerned the truly

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<sup>29</sup> The widely accepted spelling of Бѣня is "Benya." "Benia" is the proper transliteration. "Benya" will only be used when it appears in a direct quotation.

human traits of a fighter and a rebel warped but groping towards his own truth.  
(Voronskii 196-97)

In “The King” the central action of the narrative is the wedding reception of Benia’s forty-year-old sister Dvoira; an aging and goitre-afflicted woman with a dim, lethargic wit. Her husband, a man nearly half her age, had been coerced into marriage by Benia’s power and influence. Despite the initial jovial tone, the peace is quickly shattered by news that a raid is imminent. Babel sets the scene describing trays of Moldavanka’s most succulent delicacies, and endless goblets of wine. In classical Babel style the narrative itself has no obvious crescendo, but rather simply an ambiguous resolution.

The narrator explains how Benia blackmailed a rich Odessan by the name of Sendor Eichbaum. Despite Benia Krik’s unethical and moreover illegal conduct, he is not without redemption. Benia is a romantic hero according to the definition put forward by Charles S. Kraszewski in *The Romantic Hero and Contemporary Anti-Hero in Polish and Czech Literature*. Although Kraszewski deals with Polish and Czech literature, his definition of the role of the romantic hero in Eastern European literature can also apply to Russian texts. Romantic heroes are “quite aware of the power they wielded over the hearts and souls of their countrymen” (Kraszewski 10).

After extorting money from Eichbaum, he returns the cash, and humbly asks for his daughter Tsilia’s hand in marriage: “Two days later, without warning, Benya gave back all the money he had taken from Eichbaum, and then came in the evening on a social call. He wore an orange suit, and underneath his cuff a diamond bracelet

sparkled.” (“The King” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 135-136).<sup>30</sup> Benia goes on to promise Eichbaum that when Eichbaum dies he will be buried in a place of honour in the “First Jewish Cemetery” and that Tsilia will always be well cared for, as she would be the wife of the King. Benia toys with the idea of morality and redemption.

Although Benia commits a crime, and it is described violently in quite explicit detail, Babel seems to absolve his protagonist of guilt by ridding him of his plunder. It is here that Benia’s repentance is indicative of the more genuine elements of his internal characterization, demonstrating his moral compass. This radical contrast is exhibited in Benia Krik’s action, but more importantly in his internal struggle between his gangster status and Jewish upbringing.

Babel filled his world with villains and saints, rabbis and thieves, gangsters and wise men, all of whom were Jews. “Eighty-year-old Reizl reigned, traditional as a Torah scroll, tiny and hunchbacked” (“The King” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 133).<sup>31</sup> The description of Reizl draws attention to her deformities, as with Froim Grach: “old Froim in his canvas overalls, red haired and big as a house, a patch over one eye, and his cheek disfigured,” (“Froim Grach” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 171).<sup>32</sup> What was innovative in the construction of these two very different characters was that the reader perceived them through their respective ugliness, the physicality that colours them.

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<sup>30</sup> Через два дня Бенья без предупреждения вернул Эйхбауму все забранные у него деньги и после этого явился вечером с визитом. Он был одет в оранжевый костюм, под его манжеткой сиял бриллиантовый браслет. (“Korol” *Odesskie rasskazy* 10)

<sup>31</sup> И над ними царила восьмидесятилетняя Рейзл, традиционная, как свиток торы, крохотная и горбатая. (“Korol” *Odesskie rasskazy* 8)

<sup>32</sup> This work was a later addition to the *Odesskie rasskazy*. The story takes place in post Revolutionary Odessa. “Froim Grach” was published post-mortem in New York.

Benia is concerned with protecting the people of Moldavanka and keeping order, fairness and meting out justice, however twisted this may be. When whispers of a raid circulate through the ghetto, it is Benia Krik that frightened masses turn to for leadership. The police see Benia as a dangerous organizer against their authority:

The chief called the whole station together and gave them a speech: ‘We must finish off Benya Krik’ he said ‘because when you have His Majesty the Tsar you cannot have a King too. Today when Krik gives away his sister in marriage, and they will all be there, today is when to raid!’ (‘The King’ *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 134)<sup>33</sup>

In this passage “they” refers to the entirety of the Jewish community. The chief of police believes that if Benia, a Moldavanka Moses figure, is eliminated, then it will be far easier to eradicate the Jews of Odessa since they will be without their revered protector. Just as the Cossacks before them, the police of Odessa planned to pillage during a time of celebration. Ultimately, the police station finds itself in chaos after an arsonist has set fire to it. This puts an end to the chief of police’s plans to raid the wedding, news that begets more celebration amongst Dvoira Krik’s revellers.

Dvoira Krik is the epitome of the physical character. Babel writes: “Forty-year-old Dvoira, Benya Krik’s sister, the sister of the King, deformed by illness, with her swollen goitres, and her eyes bulging out of their sockets next to a frail young man who

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<sup>33</sup> Пристав собрал участок и сказал им речь. - Мы должны задушить Беню Крика,- сказал он, - потому что там, где есть государь император, там нет короля. Сегодня, когда Крик выдает замуж сестру и все они будут там, сегодня нужно сделать облаву... - (“Korol” *Odesskie rasskazy* 9)

was mute with melancholy” (“The King” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 134).<sup>34</sup> She is repulsive and her physical ailments and many maladies make her a burden on her family. The reason she is able to marry is her brother’s influence and financial standing. Her character exemplifies Babel’s physical approach to portraiture.

Benia and his men are the classic underdogs, the militia fighting against insurmountable injustices, traditional romantic heroes. Less physical description is given when it comes to Benia Krik, further adding to his mystique as an Odessa legend. For the other characters in “The King” the hyper physical attention to human form is the principle feature, in many cases to an almost grotesque extent. This hyperbole serves to create a vivid image, a technique which Viktor Shklovskii refers to as “lyrical distancing” (Shklovskii 9). In his paper “The Fate of Isaak Babel', a Child of the Russian Emancipation,” Raymond Rosenthal reiterates Shklovskii’s remarks: “Babel' the ghetto Jew broke the overwhelming tradition of psychological realism so firmly established by the nineteenth century masters of the novel” (Rosenthal 16). Babel does not linger in the minds of his characters but focuses on their physicality and on their actions. Babel’s approach to narration is the antithesis of the standards established by the Golden Age of Russian literature:

The rooms had been turned into kitchens. A rich flame, a drunk plump flame, forced its way through the smoke-blackened doors. Little old women’s faces, wobbly women’s chins, beslobbered breasts, baked in the flame’s smoky rays.

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<sup>34</sup> А она, сорокалетняя Двойра, сестра Бени Крика, сестра Короля, изуродованная болезнью, с разросшимся зубом и вылезающими из орбит глазами, сидела на горе подушек рядом с щуплым мальчиком, купленным на деньги Эйхбаума и онемевшим от тоски. (“Korol” *Odesskie rasskazy* 10)

Sweat, red as blood, pink as the foam of a rabid dog dripped from these blobs of rampant sweet-odored human flesh. (“The King” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 133)<sup>35</sup>

The language used to construct this image of the women is colourful. The adjectives are not only vivid, but also sharp. The description does not so much suggest to the reader a notion for the mind to expand upon at leisure, as much as it pointedly tells the reader what their mind’s eye should be seeing.

The details are active. Instead of simply having a double chin, a passive description, the chin is “wobbling,” giving the image another dimension; the animation of the chin serves to infuse life into this depiction. “Beslobbered breasts,” (замусоленные груди) similarly, takes the body part and enhances the description not with yet another description, such as “wet”, but with the result of an action, in this case the verb “to slobber.” This can also be translated “bedraggled” giving the reader a vision of a dripping, soiled mess. This unrefined physical detail is far more communicative, and the reader may infer other levels regarding the characterization of these women.

“Sweat, red as blood, pink as the foam of a rabid dog,” is one of the more vivid images Babel uses in this brief excerpt. It economically incorporates two similes and

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<sup>35</sup> Квартиры были превращены в кухни. Сквозь закопченные двери било тучное пламя, пьяное и пухлое пламя. В его дымных лучах пеклись старушечьи лица, бабьи тряские подбородки, замусоленные груди. Пот, розовый, как кровь, розовый, как пена бешеной собаки, обтекал эти груди разросшегося, сладко воняющего человеческого мяса. (“Король” *Odesskie rasskazy* 8)



evokes an image of putrid revulsion. With the idea of the rabid dog, he is likening his subject to a bestial creature more closely than to humanity.

Babel contrasts the grotesque with lyrical descriptions rich in evocative detail: “The tables, draped in velvet, coiled through the yard like a snake on whose belly patches of every color had been daubed, and these orange and red velvet patches sang in deep voices” (“The King” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 133).<sup>36</sup> The tables are transformed into serpents with the expressive language that is used to describe them, their colours so vivid that they cry out to those around them with the intensity of sound.

Benia is constantly occupied in a struggle to define his sense of morality. This can be seen in a later addition to the *Odesskie rasskazy*, “Spravedlivost' v skobkakh” (“Justice in Parenthesis”) which in the translation by Peter Constantine appears following “The King”. In this story, Tsudechkis, an equal opportunity crook, convinces both Benia Krik and Kolia, a competitor, to raid the cooperative store, the Justice. When Benia arrives he finds that he and his men are not the only ones set to loot the business. He and Kolia renew vows of friendship when they realize they have been deceived by the same man, Tsudechkis:

Then the two men stood opposite each other. Benya stood, and Shtift stood.

They apologized to each other, they kissed each other on the lips, and they shook hands with such force that it looked as if they were trying to tear each

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<sup>36</sup> Перекрытые бархатом столы вились по двору, как змеи, которым на брюхо наложили заплаты всех цветов, и они пели густыми голосами – заплаты из оранжевого и красного бархата. (“Король” *Odesskie rasskazy* 8)

other's arms off. ("Justice in parenthesis" *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 144)<sup>37</sup>

They embrace one another with friendship again before Benia sets off to exact revenge. Benia drags Tsudechkis out of bed and begins to beat him but is quickly interrupted by the protests of Madame Tsudechkis:

Why beat up my Zudechkis? Why? Because he wanted to feed nine little hungry fledglings? You – ha! – you're so very grand! The King! The son-in-law of a rich man, rich yourself, and your father rich too! You are a man with the world at your feet! What is one bungled deal for Benchik, when next week will bring seven successful ones? How dare you beat my Zudechkis! How dare you!

("Justice in Parenthesis" *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 145)<sup>38</sup>

She defends her husband in an act of defiance. Madame Tsudechkis is unwilling to accept that her husband must die. The language she uses is active, powerful, and her reproaches are an assault on Benia.

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<sup>37</sup> Потом они встали друг перед другом. Беня стоял и Штифт стоял. Они начали здороваться за руку, они извинялись, они целовали друг друга в губы, и каждый из них тряс руку своего товарища с такой силой, как будто он хотел ее оторвать. ("Spravedlivost' v skobkakh" *Odesskie rasskazy* 101)

<sup>38</sup> За что бить моего Цудечкиса? За то ли, что он хотел накормить девять голодных птенчиков? Вы, такой-сякой, вы – король, вы зять богача и сами богач, и ваш отец богач. Вы человек, перед которым открыто все и вся, что значит для Бенчика одно неудачное дело, когда следующая неделя пренесет вам семь удачных? Не смей бить моего Цудечкиса! Не смей! ("Spravedlivost' v skobkakh" *Odesskie rasskazy* 102)

The emotions Benia demonstrates towards Tsudechkis are not consistent with a heartless gangster since he had intended to kill him, yet decides against it and pays for Tsudechkis' medical expenses. The story is narrated by Tsudechkis, and therefore the reader interprets Benia's actions through the words of the man being beaten. Tsudechkis presents Benia as having moral and ethical conflicts, and thus the reader does not regard him as simply a killer. When asked by Tsudechkis' wife why her husband must die, Benia answers:

‘What do you mean ‘Why?’ Benya said, without removing his foot from the bridge of my nose, and tears began to trickle from his eyes. ‘He has cast a shadow on my name, he has disgraced me before my companions, you can bid him farewell, Madame Zudechkis, because my honor is more important to me than my happiness, which is why he cannot live.’ (“Justice in Parenthesis” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 144)<sup>39</sup>

The honour Benia speaks of is his sense of ego, an example of verbal characterization. The reader is able to see through his claims that he must restore his honour, and through Benia's words one can see a glimpse of inner narcissism. Since Tsudechkis has betrayed him he feels it is his duty to exact revenge. Babel suggests that Benia himself is feeling more pain than even Tsudechkis who is being beaten. Tsudechkis, while

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<sup>39</sup> - Как за что, – ответил Беня, не снимая ноги с моей переносицы, и слезы закапали у него из глаз, – он бросил тень на мое имя, он опозорил меня перед товарищами, можете проститься с ним, мадам Цудечкис, потому что моя честь дороже мне счастья и он не может оставаться живой... (“Spravedlivost' v skobkakh” *Odesskie rasskazy* 102)

narrating his own assault, notes Benia's tears. The reader may regard Benia's emotions as sincere since Tsudechkis himself views them as honest. When Benia takes his leave of Tsudechkis and his family he places on the table two hundred roubles for his victim's medical bills.

Tsudechkis is narrating this story, and the events are interpreted, clouded by his bias, and he exposes himself through psychonarratology. Yet he describes the raid on the Justice, although he was not present, with omniscient detail. Even after suffering a thorough beating, Tsudechkis still regards Benia as the King. As the story and its characters are being narrated from Tsudechkis' mind, his own psychology becomes evident through his story telling. From a psychonarratological perspective, Tsudechkis does not appear to experience or relive his trauma, but describes it almost as though he were watching the events unfurl before him. By distancing himself the violence and its aftermath, it is not as painful for him, and Benia is forgiven completely:

There is no other like Benya the King! He stamps out lies in his quest for justice – justice in parenthesis as well as justice without parenthesis. But what are you to do when everyone else is as unruffled as a pickled fish? The others don't care for justice, and don't look for it, which is even worse! ("Justice in Parenthesis" *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 145)<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Другого такого, как Беня король, – нет. Истребляя ложь, он ищет справедливость, и ту справедливость, которая в скобках и которая без скобок. Но ведь все другие невозмутимы, как холодец; они не любят искать, они не будут искать, и это хуже. ("Spravedlivost' v skobkakh" *Odesskie rasskazy* 102)

Tsudechkis does not blame Benia for beating him within an inch of his life. He himself embodies the lies that must be stamped out. Tsudechkis' internal monologue in this instance demonstrates verbal characterization. The narrator accepts that this action was fair, and Benia was justified. Justice is in parenthesis because it is not conventional justice as most would agree.

In Roshanna Sylvester's detailed examination of Odessan culture and history she states:

The head of the local investigative police squad declared in 1912 that over thirty thousand "suspicious characters" lurked in Odessa. While "shady types" could be found "in every quarter of the city," the chief inspector continued, "they live primarily in Moldavanka" where on some blocks "every single resident is a criminal." Moldavanka – if even a tiny fraction of the stories were true it was unsavoury terrain, a quarter filled with dark alleys, filthy streets, crumbling buildings, and violence. (Sylvester, *Tales of Old Odessa* 48)

Sylvester's historical analysis of Odessa looks back to the same time that Babel immortalized in his fiction, answering the question of how it was done in Odessa. Published on 5 May 1923, "Kak eto delalos' v Odesse" (How It Was Done in Odessa) sheds light on the rise of Benia Krik, and ultimately on his romantic battle to obtain justice for the down trodden.

Benia Krik, not yet known in the criminal world, was always unwaveringly confident in his abilities as a gangster:

He, Benchik, went to Froim Grach who even back then peered at the world with only one eye, and was just what he is now. And Benya told Froim, ‘Take me on, I want to come onboard your ship. The ship I end up on will do well by me’. (“How It Was Done in Odessa” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 147)<sup>41</sup>

Froim Grach, who was one of the council of gangsters associated with Lyovka Byk and Company, does take a chance on the confident Benia Krik: “Benya talks little, but he talks with zest. He talks little, but you want that he says more” (*The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 147). Benia is seen by others as a man of few but significant words. Benia’s mission is to prove his abilities by raiding Tartakovskii’s business, a formidable<sup>41</sup> opponent to say the least. Tartakovskii, a wealthy Moldavankan, is Benia’s ultimate challenge:

Tartakovsky was known as “Yid-and-a-half” or ‘Nine Raids.’ They called him ‘Yid-and-a-half’ because there wasn’t a single Jew who had as much chutzpah or money as Tartakovsky had. He was taller than the tallest Odessa policeman, and heavier than the fattest Jewess. And they called Tartakovsky ‘Nine Raids’ because the firm of Lyovka Bik and Company had launched not eight raids, not ten, but exactly nine raids against his business. To Benya, who was not yet

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<sup>41</sup> Он – Бенчик – пошел к Фроиму Грачу, который тогда уже смотрел на мир одним только глазом и был тем, что он есть. Он сказал Фроиму: - Возьми меня. Я хочу прибиться к твоему берегу. Тот берег, к которому я прибьюсь, будет в выигрыше. (“Как это делалось в Одессе” *Odesskie rasskazy* 15)

King, fell the honour of carrying out the tenth raid on Yid-and-a-half. (“How It Was Done in Odessa” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 147-148)<sup>42</sup>

Tartakovskii is a Jew, but he is one-and-one-half of a Jew intended to communicate that he is a cliché of his own culture. Physically he is described as larger than life. He is taller than all Odessans, and as fat as he is wealthy. Everything about Tartakovskii is embellished, and therefore it seems only fitting that he be Benia Krik’s first opponent.

Just as Benia did with Eichbaum in “The King,” he sends a kindly worded letter to Tartakovskii providing him opportunity to acquiesce to his terms. Instead of initially inciting violence to attain his goals, Benia shows respect by always giving an alternative. When analyzing crime in early twentieth-century Odessa, Roshanna Sylvester asserts that such letters of extortion were common practice in the criminal world. She points out that letters of this sort were written in a similar format and phrasing as proper business letters, creating the perception that “some criminals might, indeed, have seen themselves as serious professional businessmen” (Sylvester, “City of Thieves” 146). Sylvester goes on to comment on Benia himself stating:

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<sup>42</sup> Тартаковского называли у нас « полтора жида » или « девять налетов ». Полтора жида называли его потому, что ни один еврей не мог вместить в себе столько дерзости и денег, сколько было у Тартаковского. Ростом он был выше самого высокого городского в Одессе, а весу имел больше, чем самая толстая еврейка. А « девятью налетами » прозвали Тартаковского потому, что фирма Левка Бык и компания произвела на его контору не восемь и не десять налетов, а именно девять. На долю Бени, который еще не был тогда королем, выпала честь совершить на « полтора жида » десятый налет. (“Kak eto delalos' v Odesse” *Odesskie rasskazy* 15-16)

Krik's insistence on propriety in his professional appearance and conduct, in the conduct of his subordinates, and the conduct of the raid itself lends additional (if anecdotal) support to the notion that the criminal code of behaviour mirrored (albeit in a distorted way) its respectable counterpart. (Sylvester, "City of Thieves" 146)

In his letter of extortion to Tartakovskii, Benia gives ample warning, and thus, any damage that should arise from Benia's actions is somehow justified:

Much esteemed Rubin Osipovich,

I would be grateful if by the Sabbath you could place by the rainwater barrel a..., and so on. Should you choose to refuse, which you have opted to do lately, a great disappointment in your family life awaits you.

Respectfully yours,

Ben Zion Krik (148)<sup>43</sup>

It is crucial to take note of the time frame Benia outlines. He asks that the money be delivered before the Sabbath; this is similarly the case in "The King". His dealings are illegal, and as such he would like them to be terminated by the Jewish day of rest when

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<sup>43</sup> Многоуважаемый Рувим Осипович! Будьте настолько любезны положить к субботе под бочку с дождевой водой...и так далее. В случае отказа, как вы это себе в последнее время стали позволять, вас ждет большое разочарование в вашей семейной жизни. С почтением знакомый вам Бенцион Крик. ("Kak eto delalos' v Odesse" *Odesskie rasskazy* 16)



he would ideally refrain from work or handling currency. Even in the twisted gangster world, religious tradition takes on a role.

Tartakovskii replies in his letter to Benia, “If you were an idiot, I would write you as to an idiot. But from what I know of you, you aren’t one, and may the Lord prevent me from changing my mind. You, as is plain to see, are acting like a boy” (“How It Was Done in Odessa” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 149). The letter never reaches Benia, and Tartakovskii’s store is looted.

When the raid takes place, a drunk, one of Benia’s men, mistakenly shoots Josif Muginshtein, an innocent employee of Tartakovskii. In Benia’s mind this death is the fault of the drunk, and he additionally blames Tartakovskii for not taking his warnings to heart. The loss of young Muginshtein’s life moves Benia deeply, and he feels profound guilt for the murder, but only negligible fault:

Are words necessary here? There was a man, and now there’s none. An innocent bachelor, living his life like a little bird on a branch, and now he’s dead from sheer idiocy. In comes a Jew looking like a sailor, and doesn’t shoot at a bottle in a fairground booth to win a prize – he shoots at a living man! Are words necessary here? (“How It Was Done in Odessa” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 150)<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Нужны ли тут слова? Был человек, и нет человека. Жил себе невинный холостяк, как птица на ветке, - и вот он погиб через глупость. Пришел еврей, похожий на матроса, и выстрелил не в какую-нибудь бутылку с сюрпризом, а в живого человека. Нужны ли тут слова? (Babel, “Kak eto delalos’ v Odesse” *Odesskie rasskazy* 18)

Benia's outrage is clear. This monologue is a dramatic observation of Benia's perceived inner character being verbalized. This is the first instance where he is placed in a position of power, and the first time he pleads the case of those less fortunate. Muginshtein worked long hours for little money in service to a man who worked little, and earned much. For Benia, the needless death of Josif Muginshtein is the greatest crime of all.

Just as Benia felt the need to account for himself in person in "The King" he goes to the mother of young Muginshtein to pay his respects:

'Aunt Pesya' Benya then said to the dishevelled old woman rolling on the floor. 'If you want my life you can have it, but everyone makes mistakes, even God! This was a giant mistake Aunt Pesya, but didn't God Himself make a mistake when he settled the Jews in Russia so that they could be tormented as they were in Hell?' ("How It Was Done in Odessa" *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 152)<sup>45</sup>

Benia's presentation of himself is far from modest. He would almost seem to draw similarities between himself and God, either deifying himself, or humanizing God. His reference to the Jews of the Russian Empire is anything but subtle. He almost seems to excuse what has transpired as arising out of necessity in that the Jews of Russia are left

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<sup>45</sup> - Тетя Песя – сказал тогда Бенья всклокоченной старушке, валявшейся на полу, - если вам нужна моя жизнь, вы можете получить ее, но ошибаются все, даже Бог. Вышла громадная ошибка, тетя Песя. Но разве со стороны Бога не было ошибкой поселить евреев в России, чтобы они мучились, как в аду? ("Kak eto delalos' v Odesse" *Odesskie rasskazy* 20)

with so few choices. Such an analogy would seem sacrilegious, but as James Falen states: “The sublime and the ridiculous are not far apart, Babel brings them perilously close” (Falen, “The Odessa Tales: An Introduction” 197). Seeing that Babel draws little distinction between the two, one must begin to wonder which it is that Benia is conveying.

Finally, Muginshtein is given the most elaborate funeral that Odessa has ever seen. This seems to be a recurring theme for Benia. When he makes promises to those he is showing reverence and respect, it is always a distinguished funeral which he promises:

Such a funeral Odessa had never seen, nor will the world ever see the like of it. On that day the policemen wore cotton gloves. In the synagogues, draped with greenery, their doors wide open, the electricity was on. Black plumes swayed on the white horses pulling the hearse. Sixty chanters walked in front of the procession. The chanters were boys but they sang with women’s voices. The elders of the Kosher Poultry Sellers Synagogue led Aunt Pesya by the hand. Behind the elders marched the members of the Society of Jewish Shop Assistants, and behind the shop assistants marched the barristers, the doctors, and the certified midwife. (“How It Was Done in Odessa” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 152)<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Таких похорон Одесса еще не видала, а мир не увидит. Городовые в этот день дели нитяные перчатки. В синагогах, увитых зеленью и открытых настежь, горело электричество. На белых лошадях, запряженных в колесницу, качались черные плюмажи. Шестьдесят певчих шли впереди процессии. Певчие были мальчиками, но они пели женскими голосами. Старостины синагоги торговцев

The description of the funeral uses lyrical language which paints a vivid image. Babel is careful to show that Benia has spared no expense. The funeral is not only a demonstration of mourning, but also an event, and subversively an assertion of Benia's sweeping influence. This is the story of how Benia became King, and Muginshtein's funeral, arranged by Benia, would seem to double as Benia Krik's coronation.

Benia asserts his power when he confronts Tartakovskii: "Ten thousand down!" he bellowed. "Ten thousand down and a pension till she dies – may she live to be a hundred and twenty! If it's 'no,' then we leave this house together, Monsieur Tartakovsky, and go straight to my car!" ("How It Was Done in Odessa" *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 151). Benia is a romantic character fighting against injustice, and ensures that Muginshtein's mother is provided for.

The principal players in the next story, "Lyubka the Cossack" ("Liubka Kazak")<sup>47</sup> are Tsudechkis, a Jew, and Liubka Shneiweis, nicknamed Liubka the Cossack for her viciousness and propensity for violence. Babel is not known for depicting the women of his narratives in a feminine or charming light. For the most part Babel's female characters are deeply flawed, usually physically. Another classic characteristic of the women in Babel's works is a sharp acid tongue, always armed with pointed and stinging words. In this Liubka the Cossack is no exception yelling, "Shut

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кошерной птицей вели тетю Песю под руки. За старостами шли члены общества приказчиков-евреев, и за приказчиками-евреями – присяжные поверенные, доктора медицины и акушерки-фельдшерицы. ("Kak eto delalos' v Odesse" *Odesskie rasskazy* 20)

<sup>47</sup> In his translation Peter Constantine transliterates the protagonist's name as "Lyubka", this spelling will only be used when referring to direct quotations. Otherwise the Library of Congress spelling of "Liubka" will be used.

your ugly trap!’ Lyubka yelled back, and burst out laughing” (“Lyubka The Cossack” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 159).

In terms of gender equality, Liubka is the pinnacle of female empowerment. She is respected and feared by all. She is abrasive, rude, selfish, and shows little affection to her son Davidka. However, all the men in this story must answer to her. Liubka is without argument, a successful and savvy businesswoman. She owns rock quarries, wine cellars, a tavern, inn and brothel. Aunt Pesya describes Davidka’s mother:

His mother gallops around her quarries, drinks tea with Jews in the Medved Tavern, buys contraband down by the harbour and thinks of her son as she might think of last years snow. (“Lyubka the Cossack” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 155)<sup>48</sup>

Liubka falls neither under the label of Madonna, nor whore. Despite the fact that she is a mother, she is ill equipped to care for Davidka, and lacks even the slightest inklings of maternal instincts. She is also not a prostitute. Her job is that of managing the brothel. And in matters of money, Liubka is ruthless and hosts no sympathy in her cold heart.

Her abrasive and cunningly aggressive personality is juxtaposed with that of Tsudechkis, a stubborn but malleable Jew of hidden insight and wisdom. Tsudechkis

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<sup>48</sup> Мамашенька его скачет по своим каменоломням, пьет чай с евреями в трактире «Медведь» покупает в гавани контрабанду и думает о своем сыне, как о прошлогоднем снеге. (“Liubka Kazak” *Odesskie rasskazy* 34)

patronizes Liubka's establishment to celebrate a business deal he is particularly proud of. He and the man he has struck a deal with, dine in Liubka's tavern, and Tsudechkis' acquaintance partakes of the services of one of Liubka's young ladies. Tsudechkis, still pleased with himself, falls asleep, during which time his acquaintance sneaks out of the inn without a word, and more importantly, without paying Tsudechkis or Liubka. This puts him in a problematic position, and he is imprisoned in Liubka's inn for the debts of another man: "But I have some faith in God who will lead me out of here, the way He led all the Jews first out of Egypt, and then out of the desert" ("Liubka the Cossack" *Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 156).<sup>49</sup>

Tsudechkis is drawing a Talmudic comparison in order to emphasize the oppression which he feels. Allegorically he is symbolic of all the Jews of Moldavanka, and is being held captive by Liubka whose epithet pre-establishes her as a Cossack. The two are in conflict, with Liubka holding all the power and Tsudechkis is her prisoner. The imprisoned Jew and oppressive enemy is exaggerated further when Tsudechkis refers to his jailor metaphorically as Pharaoh:

'Oy, poor Zudechkis!' the small middleman then said to himself, 'You have fallen into the hands of the Pharaoh himself!' And he went over to the eastern wall of the room, muttered the whole Morning Prayer with addenda, and then

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<sup>49</sup> Я верю еще в Бога, который выведет меня отсюда, как вывел всех евреев – сначала из Египта и потом из пустыни. ("Liubka Kazak" *Odesskie rasskazy* 34)

took the crying infant in his arms. (“Lyubka the Cossack” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 156)<sup>50</sup>

The comparison is being made here between Liubka and Pharaoh Ramesses II (1303BC-1213BC) who imprisoned and enslaved the Jews in Egypt. The slave and Pharaoh relationship analogy ends when Tsudechkis, a father of eight, chastises Liubka for neglecting her son. She is at a loss to provide for Davidka, and it becomes clear that she is most deficient in her child rearing skills. When she attempts to nurse her child, Liubka discovers that her milk has run dry, and she is unable to provide Davidka with the nourishment and nurturing he needs. Attempts are made to feed the child with a bottle, but Davidka, starved for love in addition to milk, wants only his mother’s breast:

‘How you’ve tortured us you shameless woman’ he said and took the child out of the cradle. ‘But here, watch me and you might learn a thing or two, you foul mother, you!’ He laid a thin comb on Lyubka’s breast and put her son into her bed. The child stretched towards his mother, pricked himself on the comb, and started to cry. Then the old man pushed the bottle towards him. (“Lyubka the Cossack” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 160)<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> - Да - сказал тогда самому себе маленький маклер, - ты у фараона в руках, Цудечкис, - и он отошел к восточной стене, пробормотал всю утреннюю молитву с прибавлениями и взял потом на руки плачущего младенца. (“Liubka Kazak” *Odesskie rasskazy* 37)

<sup>51</sup> - Как вы замучили нас, бессовестная Любка, - сказал он и взял ребенка из люльки, - но вот учетись у меня, паскудная мать... Он приставил мелкий гребень к Любкиной груди и положил сына ей в кровать. Ребенок потянулся к матери, накололся на гребень и заплакал. Тогда старик подсунул ему соску. (“Liubka Kazak” *Odesskie rasskazy* 37)

After the child is pricked by the comb a second time and experiences pain he takes to the bottle more kindly. Tsudechkis shows Liubka how to provide for her child; where she was previously lacking he has shown her how to compensate. Liubka is only part Madonna, and part whore. She is a strange middle ground far from the ideals of feminism, and even farther from the concept of womanly virtues. It is only at the hands of a Jewish man that she becomes able to care for Davidka. Liubka's challenge is that she must acquire the skills to be a mother and the greater battle is not won; Tsudechkis therefore stays on as an employee at her inn.

Babel delves into the earthy elements of humanistic form in "Otets" ("The Father") his *Odesskii rasskaz* which tells the tale of Froim Grach and his daughter Bas'ka.<sup>52</sup> Grach's daughter, with the voice like booming thunder, desperately wants to be married. Father and daughter are both grounded in physical descriptions. One eyed Grach is a red-haired house of a man. Bas'ka has a "deafening bass voice" and squeezes her swollen feet into men's shoes. This gives the reader the vision that she is a hefty, sturdy woman, her deep voice resonating in her huge body. In Babel's eyes there is nothing feminine, enticing, or enchanting about Bas'ka Grach. In a later story Babel would write in regard to Bas'ka's son Arkadi: "the boy came tumbling out of his mother's powerful womb" ("Froim Grach" *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 172). This concept is touched upon by Eliot Borenstein. "Flesh-and-blood women were distained as impure, but the abstract, fleshless female ideal was glorified" (105). In Borenstein's definition Bas'ka fits under the category of the flesh and blood woman.

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<sup>52</sup> Баська (Bas'ka) is translated as "Basya" by Constantine. This thesis will use the Library of Congress transliterated form of the name.



Isaak Babel's concept of women demonstrates a deeply rooted tendency towards misogyny. Women are either depicted as the Madonna or the whore. In Babel's canon, she is more commonly the latter. In "The Father" there appears both the aspiring Madonna, and the whore. Bas'ka's primary goal in the "The Father" is her desire to be married, to start a family and assume the role of wife and mother. In the following passage Babel regards Moldavanka as a maternal figure, almost as a character itself. Bas'ka perceives Moldavanka in this way, and she strives to attain this goal:

And, truth to tell, from that day on Basya spent all her evenings outside the gates. She sat on the bench, sewing herself a trousseau. Pregnant women sat next to her. Heaps of sackcloth unfurled over her powerful, bandy knees. The pregnant women were filled with all kinds of things, the way a cow's udder in a pasture fills with the rosy milk of spring, and then their husbands, one by one, came from work. The quarrelsome women's husbands rung out their tousled beards beneath the water fountain, and then made their way for the hunchbacked old women. The old women washed fat babies in troughs, they slapped their grandsons' shiny bottoms, and bundled them up in their frayed skirts. And so Basya from Tulchin saw life in Moldavanka, our generous mother, a life crowded with suckling babies, drying rags, and conjugal nights, filled with big

city chic and soldierly tirelessness. The girl wanted such a life for herself too.

(“The Father” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 163)<sup>53</sup>

The “frayed skirts” and “drying rags” that characterize the day to day in Odessa are not glamorous, but the comfort and dependability that Bas'ka sees here becomes her ideal existence. This is of significant importance to her as she is driven to establish a solid family unit which she never had. Images of fertility surround her, “pregnant women were filled with all kinds of things, the way a cow’s udder in a pasture fills with the rosy milk of spring” yet she lacks a partner. Bas'ka is depicted as domestic and solid, but not as desirable. Her foil is Katiusha, a prostitute in Liubka’s brothel. Katiusha, who frequently services Benia Krik, is presumably delicate and exaggeratedly feminine. However from the absence of further description one may presume she is lacking in substance: “The music came over the sea and faded away, but Katyusha, unfailing Katyusha, was still incandescing her rosy-painted Russian paradise for Benya Krik” (“The Father” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 168). As these women are juxtaposed in this story, Siniavskii discussed the variations of character when he stated:

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<sup>53</sup> И действительно, с этого дня Баська все свои вечера проводила за воротами. Она сидела на лавочке и шила себе приданое. Беременные женщины сидели с ней рядом; груды холста ползли по ее раскоряченным могущественным коленям; беременные бабы наливались всякой всячиной, как коровье вымя наливается на пастбище розовым молоком весны, и в это время мужья их, один за другим, приходили с работы. Мужья бранчливых жен отжимали под водопроводным краном всклокоченные свои бороды и уступали потом место горбатым старухам. Старухи купали в корытах жирных младенцев, они шлепали внуков по сияющим ягодицам и заворачивали их в поношенные свои юбки. И вот Баська из Тульчина увидела жизнь Молдаванки, щедрой матери, – жизнь, набитую сосущими младенцами, сохнувшим тряпьем и брачными ночами, полными пригородного шика и солдатской неутомимости. Девушка захотела и себе такой же жизни. (“Otets” *Odesskie rasskazy* 26)

What strikes one first of all in Babel' is the variety of characters, of situations and of styles. A sublime pathos appears alongside images of the most brutal reality, painted with the precision of a naturalist. Light and shadow, the beautiful and the hideous, are juxtaposed in combinations that are unexpected and often bizarre. The law of contrasts directs the development of subjects, the selection of detail, and juxtaposition of words. (Sinyavsky 87)

Sinyavsky aptly calls attention to the contrasts Babel' employs. There is not merely conflict of story, but conflict of imagery and presentation. This observation of Babel's style was also commented on by Vyacheslav Zavalishin: "Babel rings endless variations on this device of incongruous contrasts" (Zavalishin 190).

Bas'ka immediately establishes herself as a caring and attentive domestic figure. Her motives are clear, and her actions are an external manifestation of her internal character:

She quickly went to occupy herself in the kitchen. The young girl hung her father's foot bindings on a line, and used sand to scrub the sooty teapot; she warmed up a large meatball in a cast iron pot. 'What unbearable dirt Papa!' she said, and grabbed the rancid sheepskins from the floor and threw them out the

window. ‘But I’ll get rid of this dirt!’ she shouted, and gave her father his food.  
(“The Father” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 162)<sup>54</sup>

Babel gives details of Froim Grach’s home, descriptions of squalor. “What unbearable filth Papa” is a declaration from which the reader may infer her intention to reform this state. This gives another dimension to the sense of Bas'ka through verbal literary characterization. Most important is the disposing of the sheepskin; the discarding of Grach’s old life. Bas'ka has returned to her father, and now Grach is forced to assume a more paternal role.

Although Grach is revered within his circle of outlaws, he is unable to sell his legitimacy as a decent man in order to appease the family of Solomonchik Kaplun, the object of Bas'ka’s affections. The conflict between Grach’s principal occupation as a carter, and his activities with Benia Krik does not provide him enough social standing to marry his daughter off to the son of a rich import grocer. Grach is deficient in his first significant attempt at parenting. To add insult to injury, Grach’s social position is further offended by what Mendelson calls a “reversal of roles” (73). Instead of the potential groom making a social call to the intended bride’s father to formally ask for her hand in marriage, there is an inversion of tradition, and Grach must humbly make the request. Just because the Grach and Kaplun families are from the same *shtetl* there is still an internal hierarchy to be considered:

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<sup>54</sup> Она ... пошла хлопотать на кухню. Девушка повесила на веревку отцовские портрянки, она вытерла песком закопченный чайник и стала разогревать зразу в чугунном котелке. - У вас невыносимая грязь, папаша - сказала она и выбросила за окно прокисшие овчины, валявшиеся на полу. (“Otets” *Odesskie rasskazy* 24)

It is obvious that he is aware of the contrast between his own world and that of the Odessan mercantile aristocracy. However, it is the metaphor that helps to pinpoint Grach's feeling with great economy and precision for it contains a number of semantic levels all of which reveal how many complex sensations can be continued in such an apparently simple presentation as Froim Grach. (Mendelson 70)

If one conducts a reading of the text as Mendelson suggests, it can indeed be argued that Grach is essentially the community of Moldavanka personified. As those living in the *shtetls* were bound by the ghetto walls, Froim Grach is limited by his humble carter ways. This status in turn is passed down to Bas'ka, and dictates on what level she will be able to marry. Despite her dowry, she will never be seen as worthy by the Kaplun family, much like the inhabitants of the *shtetls* were not seen as suitable for gentile society.

Ultimately Babel's characterization depends on juxtaposition for contrast, comparison for balance, conflict to drive the action of his work, and finally acceptance of given circumstances in order to facilitate catharsis. Babel's form at times may appear narrow, but in fact the breadth of his literary scope is quite expansive (Andruszko 10). The *Odesskie rasskazy* depict the various manifestations of the three-dimensional character. They differ in the levels of the cerebral, the physical, and the active, but Babel manipulates such contrasts to put emphasis on selected features. One begins to regard these characters' Jewishness as yet just another feature with which they are endowed.

The likes of Benia Krik, Tsudechkis and Froim Grach certainly embodied the spirit of the vibrant and bustling streets of Moldavanka. For the first time, the Jew was not shown as an oddity. The *Odesskie rasskazy* depicted a whole host of characters, all of them Jews, rather than an isolated character as was common in the previous generation of literature depicting Jews. Because the stories are of a Jewish community, the characters are allowed to be themselves, given license to be human and have a variety of personality traits. Unlike Dostoevsky's Isay Foimitch, the "new Jewish type" was no longer a foreigner in a community of gentiles, but a member of his own society with a voice of its own.

The Jewish characters in earlier Russian literature were self effacing, subservient, and quietly accepted their second class treatment. When faced with death they beg and bargain for mercy. These characters cheat and manipulate, and are rightfully never trusted. They perpetuate their own existences of abuse and servitude by assuming these roles without argument.

The most significant change for Jews in Russian literature following the *Odesskie rasskazy* was their newly found sense of dignity. The injustices that Jews in Russia were forced to endure is a matter of fact, but Babel's characters defied such obstacles. Instead of accepting abuse as Solomon does in Pushkin's "The Covetous Knight", Benia was prepared to defend Moldavanka against the Odessa police. Benia is not subservient to the police chief, and speaks to him as an equal. With the police station in flames, Benia walks past and salutes the chief.

In "The Jew" by Turgenev, Hirschel and his daughter Sara do not fight, they beg. Characters like Hirschel and Chekhov's Moiseika blindly serve those around them

considering the needs of their abusers before their own. Bas'ka does not subscribe to the role of pathetic servitude. She knows what she wants, and demands it be given to her. She proactively works towards her goal, sewing her own trousseau, unlike Sara in "The Jew" who cheats, begs, and grovels. When Sara's father is about to be hanged she does not actively defy his captors like Madame Tsudechkis and her children's reaction to Benia. Madame Tsudechkis fights for her husband and saves his life. She stands up to Benia Krik, a display of strength never allotted the Jews of nineteenth-century literature.

Benia Krik is given a sense of ethics unlike Gogol's Zhid Yankel who would sell Taras, a man who spared his life, to the Polish for two thousand ducats. Benia feels a deep sense of duty and loyalty to those close to him. In "Justice in Parenthesis," before he goes to kill Tsudechkis, Benia sends Froim Grach to order a pine coffin, proving there is honour even among thieves. Benia and Kolia tearfully renew their vows of friendship, and Benia warmly invites Kolia to his home, even though he has not profited from the raid. Benia is a thief, but would never sacrifice another human being for his own gains. He is Babel's romantic hero. His sense of right and wrong is twisted, and he is deeply flawed, yet is striving to accomplish good, and not only for himself.

## Conclusion

In the shrill sound of his voice could be heard a persistent irony. Many people could not look into Babel's burning eyes. By nature Babel was a debunker. He liked to back people into a corner, and was therefore regarded in Odessa as a difficult and dangerous man. (Paustovsky 149)

With the unjust execution of Isaak Babel, on 27 January 1940, his "genre of silence" was lost forever. His final words to his wife were "they didn't let me finish" (Bullock 3). It is pointless to speculate on the wealth of material that Babel potentially could have composed had he been permitted the freedom.

Through his parade of extreme personalities, the world of Odessa dynamically comes to life in the reader's imagination. "In certain cases, the fictionalized 'selves' created by Odessa writers...actually carried greater weight with the reading public than the historical writers themselves" (Stanton 118).

As Babel pioneered modern Russian short fiction, he certainly regarded minimalism as one of the hallmarks of his style. His was a style which never begged gentile society for understanding, compassion or acceptance. Defying such conventions, he strove to depict the spectrum of various Jewish characters, celebrating diversity, and thus humanizing the Jew. Babel's characters do not assume the role of the victim. When the fictional gentile world threatens to encroach on their liberties, the Jews of Moldavanka strike back. The "new Jewish type" of literature no longer accepted persecution; if wronged, they would revenge.

Since the *Odesskie rasskazy* were published, the face of the literary Russian Jew has taken on a new dimension, and the depictions have created characters with far more



nuance, rejecting previous stereotypes. In addition to Benia and his fellow Moldavankans, Babel captures the Jewish Russian experience in his *Konarmiia* and his short stories of his *The Story of My Dovecote*. An expansion of this research to include all of Babel's works would give a fuller, more comprehensive analysis of the humanized Jew in Babel's literature. This would ideally be done in the original Russian. Although Babel published his first short story almost a century ago, with numerous publications to follow, he is still not widely known in modern Russia. Babel and his works were a Soviet secret for so long that his popularity was not able to continue its momentum after his arrest. Since the translation of *The Complete Works of Isaac Babel* by Peter Constantine in 2002, a comprehensive translation with a consistent voice, the English speaking world has been introduced to Isaak Babel in a way that contemporary Russian society still has not experienced. Further research into how Babel's approach to writing has influenced subsequent Russian Jewish literature would help to begin asking the question of whether Babel's approach to the depiction of the humanized Jew had any influence on later generations of writers.

Babel's style of Jewish depiction has been carried on in some respect by contemporary novelist Liudmila Ulitskaia (1943- ). Like Babel, Ulitskaia focuses on the Jewish community, and the individual rather than the stereotype. A comparison of Ulitskaia's image of the modern humanized Jew, juxtaposed with Babel's depiction of the 1920s could evaluate how the tradition Babel began has changed since the fall of the Soviet Union. Gabriella Safran states that Babel "had succeeded at a task that had proved impossible for Gor'kii himself. That task was the representation of the Russian Jew as a strong and positive 'type,' on par with the heroes of Gor'kii's other stories"

(Safran 254). Did this “strong and positive ‘type’” survive into modern depictions of Russian Jewry? Or was Babel’s humanized image, like him, extinguished before its time?

Isaak Babel found his calling humanizing the literary image of the Jew, and mystifying his audiences, never truly putting the period at the end of his own story. “But let us stop here. Then everybody can say I put the period where it belongs” (“Justice in Parenthesis” *The Collected Stories of Isaac Babel* 145).<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> На этом кончим. И всякий скажет: точка стоит на том месте, где ей приличествует стоять. (“Spravedlivost' v skobkakh” *Odesskie rasskazy* 102)

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