Pro Edu. International Journal of Educational Sciences
No. 13, Year 7/2025
https://www.ifiasa.com/peijes e- ISSN 2668-5825, p-ISSN 2668-5817

https://doi.org/10.26520/peijes.2025.13.7.5-13

CARTOGHAPHIES OF SUFFERING: LITERARY AND THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON HUMAN DIGNITY

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the multifaceted nature of suffering as reflected in literature, theology, and human experience. Through a comparative and interdisciplinary lens, it examines how suffering - whether physical, psychological, social, or spiritual - can become a privileged space of transformation, communion, and revelation. From the shores of memory in Serenade for Nadia, where love and historical trauma intertwine, to the stark testimonies of totalitarian cruelty in The Gulag Archipelago and Cilka's Journey, suffering is portrayed not merely as affliction, but as a gateway to truth, resilience, and moral clarity. The analysis continues with Oscar and the Lady in Pink, where the innocent voice of a terminally ill child reconfigures suffering into a spiritual ascent, echoing Christic acceptance and hope. Finally, the comparative reflection between the bent woman from the Gospel of Luke and Quasimodo from Victor Hugo's The Hunchback of Notre-Dame reveals how compassion and recognition can restore dignity and awaken the soul. Across these narratives, suffering is not reduced to pathology or punishment—it becomes a theological and existential paradigm, a call to love, to discern, and to lift others from the weight of their pain. Together, these texts affirm that healing is not only a divine gift but also a human vocation. They invite us to see suffering not as a rupture, but as a bridge - toward God, toward others, and toward the deepest truths of the human condition.

Keywords: *suffering; compassion; resilience; redemption; witness*;

INTRODUCTION

There is a profound observation, validated by human experience and theological reflection, that those who have endured suffering are better equipped to understand the cross borne by others. Such individuals display a heightened empathy toward those in pain, as suffering - far from being limited to illness - encompasses the torments inflicted by oppressive regimes, social injustices, and existential traumas. It becomes a space of encounter with truth and with God.

Suffering is not merely a constraint of existence; it can become a genuine path to knowledge, inner transformation, and deep communion. Though not always rationally explicable, suffering can be lived with meaning, turning into a journey toward light. In this sense, the personal cross is not an obstacle, but a bridge to a deeper understanding of life and the divine.

In all its forms - physical, psychological, social, or spiritual - suffering proves to be a privileged space of revelation and soul maturation. Extreme experiences, such as those

endured in Nazi extermination camps or Soviet gulags, have not only left deep scars on the collective memory of humanity, but have also offered a radical perspective on human nature, the manifestation of evil, and the capacity for resilience, hope, and rediscovery in the darkest moments.

Christian theology affirms that God reveals Himself in the concrete circumstances of life, and suffering often becomes the privileged locus of this revelation. Those who have passed through pain, poverty, and trials not only understand more profoundly the cross of others, but also come to know more intimately the help of God, received in moments of deep crisis.

1. SERENADE ON THE SHORE OF MEMORY: ON LOVE, SUFFERING AND DIGNITY IN THE FACE OF HISTORY

Standing on the shore of Lake Gennesaret, Jesus encounters several fishermen washing their nets - a sign that the night had yielded no catch and the day was beginning under the shadow of scarcity. Seeing Simon Peter - whom He had previously met and healed his mother-in-law (cf. *Luke* 4, 38; *John* 1, 40) - Jesus asks for his boat to use as a pulpit. Pushing slightly away from the shore, He becomes both visible and audible to the gathered crowd, continuing His work of preaching.

After concluding His sermon and dismissing the multitude, Jesus turns to Simon Peter, urging him to cast the nets once more: "Master, we have toiled all night and caught nothing; nevertheless, at Your word I will let down the net" (*Luke* 5, 5). Peter's response reveals a tension between human experience and trust in the divine word. Though the night had been fruitless, obedience to the Savior's command yields an astonishing result: such a great catch of fish that "both boats began to sink" (*Luke* 5, 6).

This symbolic setting - a shore, a body of water, a crowd gathered, and a boat - especially as portrayed in the account of the miraculous catch (*Luke* 5, 1–11), naturally evokes the novel *Serenade for Nadia*, a recent read that profoundly and expressively reflects the realities of our time. These realities are vividly "painted" through a conception of "justice" that paradigmatically mirrors the attitudes and tensions of the World War II era, in which the narrative is set.

Maya is the character chosen by Turkish author Zülfü Livaneli to tell the story during a flight from Istanbul to Boston. A 36-year-old single mother, divorced and employed at Istanbul University, she is asked to care for Professor Maximilian Wagner, an octogenarian (born in 1914, aged 87 at the time), a Harvard professor visiting Istanbul to give a lecture. Upon learning his age, Maya assumes his wife must have died or they divorced.

She reflects: "Back in his day, people married to spend their lives together, not to divorce, as happens now."[1]

We also learn that Max, an American citizen of German origin, had spent considerable time in the city on the Bosphorus, from which he had once fled, his soul in turmoil. Revisiting Max's youth in Nazi Germany, we learn he had married Nadia, a Jewish woman. Though they had hoped their joy and family life would remain undisturbed, they were soon forced to leave Germany - and to part ways temporarily - once Nadia's origins

[1] Zülfü LIVANELI, *Serenadă pentru Nadia,* translated by Luminița Munteanu, Publishing House Humanitas, București, 2021, p. 12.

were discovered. This human response echoes Dostoevsky's insight that man matures only through suffering. The novel explores the theme of individuals who believe themselves to possess absolute truth and, when ignored or contradicted, become dangerous, resorting to violence to impose their ideas.

Stefan Zweig, in a monograph, describes this mindset: "Unilateral thinking inevitably leads to injustice in action, and when a person or a nation is consumed by a single worldview, there is no room for understanding or tolerance."[2] *Serenade for Nadia* also portrays the suffering of Maya's grandmother, who was unjustly persecuted during the war and declared: "If you insist on identifying a disease, it is human cruelty… and it kills."[3]

Max arrived in Istanbul in 1939, while Nadia, after spending time in the Dachau concentration camp - where she lost the child she was carrying - reached Romania. They managed to learn of each other's survival, and their reunion seemed possible when the ship *Struma*, carrying 790 passengers from Constanța (December 12, 1941), reached the waters near Istanbul. There, off the coast of Şile, the ship remained for months due to diplomatic deadlock among several nations: "Struma was the result of the collective guilt of England, Russia, Turkey, Germany, and Romania."[4] Eventually, the ship was torpedoed and sank. Nadia perished along with nearly all passengers; only one survived.

At age 87, Max returns to Istanbul and asks Maya to accompany him to the beach at Şile, where he had waited daily while Nadia was held aboard the *Struma*, just a few hundred meters away. On that beach, Max plays for the last time a few notes from the piece named after the novel itself: *Serenade for Nadia*. It is an unforgettable image, masterfully described—a frail old man playing the violin on a desolate shore, his hands frozen, overcome by winter's chill. The piece *Serenade for Nadia* truly exists, composed and performed during those dramatic days when the two spouses were so near, hoping for reunion. Listening to the music, Maya exclaims: "How can a human being create something like this, how is it possible?! That is the voice of God."[5]

Ultimately, *Serenade for Nadia* is not merely a novel about the Holocaust - it is a story about people, identity, ethnicity, nationhood, and history; about forgetting and unearthing historical truth, even within the framework of fiction.

"The love between these two people - he, a German (Maximilian Wagner), she, a Jew (Nadia Deborah Wagner) - formed a human bridge stronger than all the world's prejudices"[6] for "love and death are sworn enemies."[7]

[2] Stefan ZWEIG, *Lupta în jurul unui rug. Castellio împotriva lui Calvin,* translated by E. Marghita, Publishing House Humanitas, București, 2016, p. 193.
[3] Zülfü LIVANELI, *Serenadă pentru Nadia*, p. 86.
[4] Zülfü LIVANELI, *Serenadă pentru Nadia*, p. 424.
[5] Zülfü LIVANELI, *Serenadă pentru Nadia*, p. 52.
[6] Zülfü LIVANELI, *Serenadă pentru Nadia*, p.465.
[7] Patrick SÜSKIND, *Despre iubire și moarte*, translated by Ionuț Budașcu, Publishing House Humanitas, București, 2015, p. 9.

2. FROM DINU PĂTURICĂ TO THE GULAG: TESTIMONIAL LITERATURE AND THE THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING – REFLECTIONS ON EVIL AND FORGIVENESS

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* is not merely a literary work, but a historical document—a testimony to the cruelty of a totalitarian regime and the gratuitous suffering inflicted upon human beings by mephistophelian minds. With painful lucidity, Solzhenitsyn asks: "Where did this breed of wolves come from in our people?"[8] He also explains the psychological mechanism behind deliberate evil: "To do evil, a man must first perceive it as good, or as a natural and justified act."[9]

These "wolves" who justify evil as good are still among us today—perhaps more refined, more aristocratic, but no less dangerous. Nicolae Filimon captured this paradigm in the character of Dinu Păturică—an archetype of falsity, moral smallness, and disguised selfishness. Such individuals mold themselves to others' desires to gain trust, yet are devoid of goodness and full of deceit. Their sadistic irony evokes traits common to totalitarian regimes such as Nazi Germany and Stalinist USSR.

In *Letters to Vasile Alecsandri*, Ion Ghica skillfully and ironically sketches the portrait of Băltărețu—a quintessential social climber, obsessed with status and rapid enrichment, regardless of the means. In a memorable passage, Ghica writes: "The boyar's fingers were adorned with rings of ruby, emerald, and diamond. He was awaited at the boyar council, and the realization of patriotic ideas depended on him. He handled the remaining money in the country; he had dealings with Tsarigrad and Beciula; his signature carried weight even beyond Lipsca."[10]

This image of opulence and influence is abruptly dismantled when the unjust means by which Băltărețu built his position are revealed. His downfall symbolizes a return to his true condition, hidden beneath the deceptive appearances of success.

In this sense, Băltărețu is paradigmatic, much like Dinu Păturică from *Ciocoii vechi și noi* (*The Old and the New Parvenus*) by Nicolae Filimon - both representing the unscrupulous parvenu, for whom lies, manipulation, and moral emptiness are natural instruments of social advancement.

For such individuals, acknowledging wrongdoing and seeking divine forgiveness are foreign concepts. The desire for forgiveness - understood as heavenly reward - does not enter their spiritual horizon. In contrast, Raskolnikov, the protagonist of Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, is forgiven precisely because, in the depths of his suffering, he finds Christ, seeking Him with sincerity and repentance.

If the gates of Auschwitz-Birkenau bore the cynical inscription "Arbeit macht frei" ("Work sets you free"), the Gulag of Vorkuta proclaimed: "Work in the USSR is honor and glory." While the Nazis used Zyklon-B gas, Stalin preferred slow and merciless methods: cold, hunger, and exhaustion. Heather Morris, through the voice of Cilka Klein - a survivor of both Nazi camps and Soviet gulags - expresses with heartbreaking sincerity the reality of these horrors: "I don't know what love is. To allow myself to fall in love with someone

[8] Alexandr SOLJENITÎN, *Arhipelagul Gulag, 1918-1956: încercare de investigație literară. Părțile întâi și a doua,* vol. I, translated by Nicolae Iliescu, Publishing House Univers, București, 1997, p. 4.
[9] Alexandr SOLJENITÎN, *Arhipelagul Gulag, 1918-1956: încercare de investigație literară. Părțile întâi și a doua,* vol. I, p.116.
[10] Ion GHICA, *Scrisori către Vasile Alecsandri*, Publishing House Minerva, București, 1974, p. 123.

would mean believing in a future. And (here) there is none…"[11]

Testimonial literature, such as Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* or Heather Morris's *Cilka's Journey*, transcends the boundaries of fiction and becomes historical documentation, psychological analysis, and moral reflection. These works teach us that evil manifests not only through cruelty, but also through its justification as good, through the distortion of conscience and the manipulation of values.

At the same time, Christian theology invites us to view suffering not as punishment, but as an opportunity for encounter with God. The personal cross thus becomes a path to knowledge, solidarity, and hope. Those who have endured profound trials are often the ones who can truly understand and support the suffering of others, bearing witness to divine grace revealed in life's darkest moments. Suffering is not merely a limiting experience - it can become a path to understanding, transformation, and communion. It may defy explanation, but it can be lived with meaning. In this sense, the personal cross is not an obstacle, but a bridge toward light.[12]

3. THE CROSS OF SUFFERING AS PARADIGM IN THE NOVEL *OSCAR AND THE LADY IN PINK*[13]

The novel *Oscar and the Lady in Pink* offers a profound meditation on suffering, death, and the meaning of existence, filtered through the perspective of a child with leukemia. From Greek tragedy to Christian literature, from Stoic philosophy to existentialist thought, pain has been understood as punishment, purification, or mystery. In Éric-Emmanuel Schmitt's novel, suffering is approached through the eyes of Oscar, a child living his final days in a hospital. This innocent yet profound perspective allows for a reevaluation of suffering as a spiritual experience.

Oscar embodies a Christ-like figure of assumed suffering. He is a ten-year-old boy, aware of his impending death, who does not rebel but seeks meaning. Through letters addressed to God, Oscar transforms his pain into a dialogue with transcendence. Like Christ, he does not flee from the cross but embraces it. In this sense, Oscar becomes a Christic figure - not through miracles, but through the acceptance of suffering as a path toward light.

"*The illness is part of me. Why should people treat me differently just because I'm sick?*,"[14] the child asks. This statement reflects a spiritual maturity that transcends biological age. Oscar does not ask for pity, but for meaning. His cross is both the illness and the awareness of life's fragility.

The other central character is the Lady in Pink, a nurse who cares for Oscar. She is a maternal and spiritual figure who accompanies him on his journey toward death. She does not offer explanations, but presence. Through her imaginative game - each day representing ten years - she helps Oscar live a full life in twelve days. This is a pedagogy of meaning, a form of pedagogical kenosis in which the adult empties herself to fill the child with purpose.

[11] Heather MORRIS, *Călătoria Cilkăi,* translated by Luana Schidu, Publishing House Humanitas, București, 2020, p. 316.
[12] Jürgen MOLTMANN, *Dumnezeu în suferință*, translated by Radu Gheorghiță, Publishing House Casa Cărții, Oradea, 2004, pp. 81-87.
[13] Éric-Emmanuel SCHMITT, *Oscar și Tanti Roz*, translated by Marieva Ionescu, Publishing House Humanitas, 2012, passim.
[14] Éric-Emmanuel SCHMITT, *Oscar și Tanti Roz*, p. 23.

"Life is a gift. Don't forget that,"[15] she tells him, conveying the essence of her philosophy: to cherish life regardless of circumstances. In biblical terms, she is a Simon of Cyrene, helping the child carry his cross - not by taking it upon herself, but by teaching him how to bear it with dignity.

Oscar's letters to God are prayers, confessions, meditations. They do not ask for miracles, but for understanding. In them, suffering is not denied but transfigured. Oscar does not ask to be healed, but to be understood. This is a theology of acceptance, not resignation. "...the same mistake is made about life. We forget that it is fragile, delicate, ephemeral. We all behave as if we were immortal."[16]

This reflection is a true patristic meditation. Life is a gift, not a right. Suffering is part of the human condition, not an anomaly. Oscar learns to live not in spite of death, but through it. The cross, in the Christian sense, is not only suffering but also resurrection. In the novel, Oscar dies, but his death is filled with light. He does not depart into darkness, but into hope. His final letter is a doxology: "Lord, I think I love You." It is a spiritual resurrection, the fulfillment of the path of the cross. Thus, *Oscar and the Lady in Pink* becomes a modern parable of the Cross - not in a dogmatic sense, but in an existential one. It is a call to embrace suffering as a path to meaning, not as punishment. It is an invitation to live each moment as a gift, not as an obligation.

Schmitt's novel offers an implicit theology of suffering, in which the cross is not merely a sign of pain, but also of love and hope. Oscar becomes a Christic figure, and the Lady in Pink - a living icon of compassion. Together, they construct a liturgy of suffering, in which death is transfigured into life. In a world that flees from pain, *Oscar and the Lady in Pink* reminds us that suffering can be the place of encounter with God.

4. SUFFERING, OTHERNESS AND COMPASSION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF QUASIMODO AND THE BENT WOMAN

In the figure of the bent woman healed by the Savior (*Luke* 13, 10–17), we find, to some extent, a reflection of ourselves. Though marginalized and suffering, she does not fall into despair. She continues to attend the synagogue. It is there that she encounters Christ - He sees her, calls her, and heals her without her uttering a single request. When I first heard this Gospel passage as a child, I did not truly grasp what it meant to be bent. Time, however, brings understanding. Medically, this condition may correspond to lumbar spondylosis, and in popular language, such individuals are often referred to as "hunchbacks."

In world literature, a similarly emblematic figure is Quasimodo, the disfigured bell-ringer from Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*.[17] Quasimodo is portrayed as grotesque in appearance - with a pronounced hump, deafness caused by the bells, and features deemed "monstrous" by those around him.

Yet Quasimodo embodies a profound inner beauty: he is loyal, sensitive, and capable of sacrificial love for Esmeralda, the young woman he protects with devotion. Though rejected by society, he becomes a symbol of resistance against prejudice and the quest for acceptance. Hugo crafts a parable about the contrast between appearance and essence, about

[15] Éric-Emmanuel SCHMITT, *Oscar și Tanti Roz*, p. 48.
[16] Éric-Emmanuel SCHMITT, *Oscar și Tanti Roz*, p. 28.
[17] Victor HUGO, *Cocoșatul de la Notre Dame,* translated by Andreea Diana Gierling, Publishing House Curtea Veche, București, 2013, passim.

the nobility of the soul that can flourish even in the darkest conditions. Through this character, Hugo critiques the superficiality of a society that judges by appearances and excludes those who do not conform to aesthetic or social norms. Quasimodo thus becomes a symbol of the marginalized human, deeply humanized through suffering and love. Moreover, Quasimodo lives within the sacred space of Notre-Dame Cathedral, which becomes not only his refuge but also a place of communion and contemplation.

Though not religious in a dogmatic sense, his behavior reflects a deep spirituality born of pain and isolation. Initially, Quasimodo blindly follows Archdeacon Claude Frollo, who had adopted and educated him. However, as the story unfolds, Quasimodo begins to discern between good and evil - even if it means opposing his former protector. His decision to save Esmeralda, despite Frollo's orders, is an act of moral maturity and affirmation of conscience.

This evolution echoes the soul's struggle for freedom and truth - a central theme in Orthodox theology: man is called to break free from the bondage of sin and unite with God through love and discernment. Interestingly, historical evidence suggests Hugo may have been inspired by a real person - a hunchbacked sculptor nicknamed "Le Bossu," who worked on the cathedral's restoration during the time Hugo was writing the novel.[18]

It is fitting to draw a brief correspondence between the biblical and literary figures: a) The bent woman, healed by Christ b) Quasimodo, the hunchback of Notre-Dame.

a) The bent woman is described in *Luke*'s Gospel (13, 10–17) as being "bound by a spirit of infirmity" for eighteen years. Not only was her body bent, but her gaze - she could not look to the heavens or see the faces around her. Her existence was closed in on itself, a metaphor for a soul burdened by guilt, shame, or abandonment. b) Quasimodo endures dual suffering: physical and social. His grotesque appearance leads to rejection, mockery, and fear. He knows no compassion, only isolation. The cathedral becomes his only place of acceptance, yet also a prison of solitude. In both cases, suffering is not merely a medical issue, but a rupture of communion - with others, with oneself, and with God.

a) Jesus sees the bent woman and calls her. She does not ask, shout, or demand. Healing comes from Christ's initiative, who calls her "daughter of Abraham" - a restoration of her spiritual dignity. Healing begins with a gaze, with recognition. b) Esmeralda looks at Quasimodo without fear. For the first time, someone treats him gently. That gaze transforms him. It is not physical healing, but one of the heart. He learns what it means to love, to protect, to sacrifice. Compassion is not an act of superiority, but an encounter that lifts. It is light piercing the darkness of loneliness and dissolving it.

a) The woman straightens and begins to glorify God. Not only her body is restored, but her entire being. It is a miniature resurrection, a foretaste of final restoration. b) Quasimodo becomes a hero - not through strength, but through love. He saves Esmeralda, opposes injustice, and ultimately dies beside her in a gesture of absolute fidelity. Though his body remains deformed, his soul shines. True transformation is not aesthetic, but spiritual. Healing means regaining the capacity to love and be loved.

a) The bent woman becomes a witness to God's power. She is not merely a medical case, but an icon of divine mercy that transcends social and religious norms. b) Quasimodo remains in the reader's memory as a symbol of love that transcends appearances. He proves that true beauty is not seen with the eyes, but felt with the heart.

[18] https://historia.ro/sectiune/general/cine-a-fost-cu-adevarat-hidosul-quasimodo-574368.html

Both teach us that healing is not only a gift, but also a calling: to look upon the suffering with compassion, to be the outstretched hand that lifts.

One day, I encountered a woman with a similar affliction: her body bent nearly at a 90-degree angle, leaning on a cane. She could not look to the sky or into the faces of those around her. This being, trapped in long-standing suffering, is precisely the one Christ liberates in the Gospel passage. With gentle authority, He lifts her from humiliation and restores her to the verticality of being, granting her freedom, dignity, and the ability to contemplate the heavens and meet the gaze of others.

Saint Theophylact of Bulgaria interprets this miracle not merely as physical healing, but as the restoration of the inner man: "Understand this miracle also in reference to the inner man. For the soul is 'bent' when it inclines only toward earthly cares and seeks nothing heavenly or divine."[19]

Thus, even if our bodies stand upright, our souls may be bent under the weight of worldly concerns, losing their orientation toward heaven. The healing of the bent woman becomes a metaphor for the restoration of the human being in its entirety—body and soul—through encounter with Christ.

CONCLUSIONS

Suffering, in its manifold forms - physical, moral, historical, or spiritual - is revealed not merely as a limiting experience, but as a pathway to truth: about humanity, the world, and God. Whether expressed poetically, as in *Serenade on the Shore of Memory*, confessionally, as in testimonial literature, or symbolically, as in Schmitt's novel, suffering becomes a space of encounter - with otherness, with dignity, and with transcendence. In this light, suffering is examined as a locus of revelation: between the personal cross and historical memory.

The characters explored - from Dinu Păturică to Quasimodo, from Băltărețu to Raskolnikov, from Maximilian Wagner and his wife Nadia to Oscar - demonstrate that evil is not merely an external force, but an inner choice, often justified through the distortion of conscience. In contrast, the sincere acceptance of suffering and the openness to forgiveness become a path to redemption - a personal cross that transforms pain into hope.

Thus, literature and theology converge in a shared endeavor: to understand suffering not as condemnation, but as a possibility for moral and spiritual renewal. In the face of history, cruelty, and social opportunism, the enduring question remains: how can we preserve human dignity? The answer, perhaps, lies in the capacity to suffer meaningfully, to love sacrificially, and to seek truth beyond appearances.

[19] Saint TEOFILACT AL BULGARIEI, *Tâlcuirea Sfintei Evanghelii de la Luca,* Publishing House Sophia, București, 2007, p. 191.

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