

# **An Essay on Guirgis’s Play the Last Days of Judas Iscariot**

**Pierre MALABA KOMPANYA**

Junior Lecturer

Department of English Letters and Civilization, Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences, University of Kinshasa, P.O. Box 243 Kinshasa XI,  
Democratic Republic of the Congo

## **Introduction**

*The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* is a tremendous modernist play of new ideas that the writer has communicatively addressed to his contemporaries with the aim of turning a biblical account of Judas Iscariot’s betrayal of Jesus of Nazareth into a trial where he has brought in judges, lawyers, and witnesses.

However, Guirgis has attempted to question and break the traditions, to question the established truths, certainties, ideas while seeking after new ones. Such a new truth as heaving Judas Iscariot on the stand before judges, lawyers, and witnesses with the purpose to examine his case.

## **1. About Stephen Adly Guirgis and the play itself**

### **1.1. Guirgis’ Life**

Stephen Adly Guirgis, a native of New York, was born on September 1<sup>st</sup>, 1964 to an Irish Catholic mother and a Coptic Egyptian father. His father, who was from Egypt, met his Irish – American wife when she was visiting Cairo. The couple married and started their family in New York. Guirgis graduated from University at Albany, SUNY in 1992. He studied drama at HB Studio.

Guirgis is a member of New York City’s LAByrinth Theater Company. His plays have been produced on the five continents and throughout the United States.

*The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* shares many of traits that have made Guirgis a playwright to reckon with in recent years: a fierce and a questing mind that refuses to settle for glib, oversimplified answers, a gift for identifying with life’s losers and an unforced eloquence that finds poetry in lowdown street talk... Guirgis is a zealous and emphatic researcher, and he presents dilemmas of ancient Galilee in terms winningly accessible to the twenty – first century...” – The New York Times (2005).

### **1.2. Guirgis’ Literary Career**

Stephen Adly Guirgis has said he writes plays about what keeps him up at night.

He began his literary career as an actor, studying theatre at the University at Albany, and joining an upstart New York Theatre group with former classmate John Ortiz after graduation.

The LAByrinth Theater Company, founded in 1992, is dedicated to expanding the boundaries of mainstream theater and pushing artistic limits in all areas of the theater, including experimental script writing. The group includes a group of over 120 artisans working to bring new concepts and ideals to the stage.

Guirgis is one of the following: leading playwrights of his generation. His works include: “*The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* (2005), which was named as one of the 10 best plays of the year” by a journal Time and Entertainment Weekly.

*Race, Religion, and Politics (1997)*  
*Den of Thieves (1997)*  
*An Arabia We'd All Be Kings (1999)*  
*Jesus Hopped the 'A' Train (2000)*  
*Our Lady of 121<sup>st</sup> (2002)*  
*Little Flower of East Orange (2008)*  
*Motherfucker with a Hat (2011)*  
*Between Riverside and Crazy (2015)*  
One – Act plays  
*Francisco and Benny (his first play, not produced)*  
Dominica the Fat Ugly Ho (2006)

Guirgis is a playwright, a director, and actor. He wrote one of LAByrinth's first plays, in Arabia, *We'd All Be Kings*, and with it he began making a name for himself in Theatre circles.

As an actor, Guirgis has performed in film, TV and on stage. He has directed productions across the USA.

Through his work in theatre, Guirgis has used improvisational theatre to teach VIH/AIDS Prevention and conflict resolution in prisons, schools, and hospitals.

He has a sharp ear for the poetic vulgarities of street talk and a way with incorporating spiritual considerations, especially as they relate to temptation, charity, and forgiveness.

Guirgis is a winner of several awards in Drama –

In 2000, Guirgis was a winner of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe First Award;

In 2006, Playwrights Adrienne Kennedy and Stephen Adly Guirgis are winners of the 2006 PEN/Laura Pels Awards for Drama, announced the national writers association.

In 2014, Guirgis wins the \$ 200 000 Steinberg Distinguished Playwright Award;

In 2015, Pulitzer Prize for Drama goes to Stephen Adly Guirgis;

In addition to his Pulitzer Prize, Guirgis is the recipient of the Windham – Campbell Literature Prize, the Lucille Lorted Award, and Whiting Award.

In 2016, American Academy of Arts & Letters announces 2016 literature award winners – Stephen Adly Guirgis & Lynn Nottage both received the Arts & letters Awards in Literature.

## **2. Stephen Adly Guirgis and Deconstructionism**

Deconstructionism, by definition, portrays life as a questioning of established truths and certainties, while looking for new truth, deconstructionism is a subset of Postmodernism, and most often seen in independent theater groups around the country. Guirgis' play *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* is a prime example of this unique literary style – deconstructionism. His love of theater and play writing has led him to become a member of one of these groups. He is a co-artistic director of New York City's LAByrinth Theater Company (*The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* and Deconstructionism.moderntheatre.wordpress.com).

As a playwright, Guirgis, takes a new look at the most read book in the world, the Bible. He examines the New Testament. Guirgis was raised Catholic and he personally questioned the "truths" the nuns and priests were trying to teach him. This is somehow the essence of deconstructionism, questioning established truths and certainties and old traditions while looking for new truth as in *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*.

In this search for truth, the play takes us to a court room in purgatory. Lawyers call witnesses to the stand to question and cross examine witnesses in a search for understanding and knowledge. For example, Simon the Zealot, a disciple of Jesus of Nazareth, is called and questioned to the witness stand.

Simon reveals to the court that he thought Judas was a good man, that he loved Jesus and truly meant him not to harm. This is a totally new way to look at Judas's actions compared to Catholic tradition. An additional example of Guirgis's deconstructionism, is observed when the court watches a scene showing a conversation between Judas and Jesus in purgatory. Jesus repeatedly expresses love and forgiveness for Judas. Judas continually rejects these kind overtures. This also is a new way to look at the tradition of Judas' eternity in hell.

### 3. Themes

#### 3.1. Central theme

The central theme of the play *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot* is **Judas Iscariot's betrayal of his Master** that becomes subject of his trial before being sentenced. Judas Iscariot notoriously known for having betrayed Jesus Christ, his Master, passed by a trial conducted by Judge Littlefield to resolve the dispute, a number of offences were brought against the defendant or the suspect Judas Iscariot by the Prosecutor El-Fayoumy. And the defense lawyer Cunningham in the investigation phase of the criminal process, assisted the suspect in gathering exonerating evidence and protected him from violations of his rights at the hands of law-enforcement personal.

Despite the gathered exonerated evidence and the protection of the suspect brought by the defense attorney, the defendant is found guilty referring to the verdict of eternal damnation resolved by the trial jury.

**Butch Honeywell:** *um, uh, Mr. Iscariot? Uh, Mr. Iscariot, Uh, Mr. Iscariot, I uh, I don't know if you can hear me, But, I just wanted to introduce myself, if, if I Could. I'm, uh, Butch Honeywell. I was the Foreman of the jury at your trial there... and...*

*Well: We found you guilty, Mr. Iscariot...*

*I'm sorry about that...Oh, Uh... I brought*

*You've twelve-pack of beer (Guirgis, 2005:74).*

#### 3.2. The Secondary themes

Several sub-themes could be deduced from this play such as, Christianity, justice, despair, eternal life, salvation, predestination, free will, repentance, mercy, forgiveness, existentialism, loyalty, honesty, integrity, truth, hell and eternal death, disobedience, and exploitation of children.

**Christianity** is a major sub-theme in this play. Almost everything in the play turns around Jesus Christ's judgment and crucifixion as he was handed over by Judas Iscariot to the High Priest and the ruler accusing him of blasphemy, sedition, etc.

Another sub-theme treated in the play is **justice** which could be explained by the fact that it is the ultimate goal of Judas's trial. For the Holy Scripts attest that justice elevates a nation. However, theories of retributive justice say that wrongdoing should be punished to ensure justice, in order to make better people (wen.m.wikipedia>wiki>justice. retrieved on August 15, 2022).

In the play, the writer of *the Last Days of Judas Iscariot* has spectacularly thought of writing a play on Judas Iscariot's trial/judgment in which judge Littlefield, the Prosecution attorney El-Fayoumy, the Defense attorney Cunningham, the jury members, as well as the witnesses are brought in, so as to ensure justice on Judas's case. And this is fair assuming that none shall be condemned without being heard.

Another sub-theme of this play is **despair**. Despair could be explained when Judas Iscariot succumbs to despair due to this betrayal.

Sigmund Freud scientifically demonstrates:

*“Man's instinct for self-preservation is his most supple and reflexive muscle. When that muscle fails, it is because his mind has failed. A decision to take one's own life can only be precipitated by a failure of the mind – an irrational rebellion*

*against man's most basic instinct – to endure and live. Therefore, yes – the victim of suicide must be pre-certified as, indeed, psychotic... suicide is a direct sign of mental illness” (Guirgis, 2005: 43).*

A fourth sub-theme is **eternal life** or **salvation** which is part of Jesus Christ's mission on earth, saving humanity, as Simon the Zealot alluded:

*... I think, personally, that Judas dead what he did to help Jesus, realize his destiny and fulfill His mission (Guirgis, 2005:31).*

A fifth sub-theme developed in the play is **predestination**. This could be explained by referring to the context of the play in which we find various indicators assuming Judas Iscariot act of betrayal being predestined to betrays Jesus of Nazareth, although it is subject to debate.

Firstly, he betrayed Jesus Christ, his Master in handing Him to the Jewish High-Priest Caiaphas the Elder for 30 pieces of silver coin that he did not even profitably use but he threw them into the temple. In the Old Testament, 30 pieces of silver was the value in compensation for an injured slave. Zechariah for instance received 30 pieces of silver for his work as a shepherd, at which he failed.

Finally, Judas's surname is more probably a corruption of the Latin sicariis – murderer, or assassin than an indication of family origin, suggesting he would have belonged to the sicarii, the most radical Jewish group, some of whom were terrorists.

A sixth sub-theme is **free will** and it has traditionally been conceived of as a kind of power to control one's choices and actions. “Free will” is the strongest control condition – whatever that turns out to be necessary for moral responsibility (Wolf, 1930: 3 – 4).

In the play, Satan being questioned by the two parties composed of the prosecution and the defense because of being accused of having tempted Eve to eat the apple in order to prove to God that He had made an error in giving man domination over the earth as it is proven in the books of Genesis and Ezekiel. And on the other hand, Satan is accused of having entered Judas Iscariot's heart to betray Jesus of Nazareth then explains how man himself exercises free will to align or betray the established laws or principles:

Judge Littlefield: Quiet! (To Satan) Proceed.

*Satan: Thank you. Look, I didn't make you people, God did, okay? But, there was a design flaw in the creation: He gave you free will – and to balance that out, you were designed the “self-correct” but, unlike the “free will” muscle the “self-correct” muscle is not a particular favorite of the Homo sapiens (Guirgis, 2005: 67 – 68).*

Another sub-theme is **repentance** and it is shown when Judas Iscariot went to return the blood money to the High Priest and started recanting, regretting because of having sold out the Innocent blood. This is a false repentance not a true one. Judas Iscariot should have gone to Jesus alone who can forgive; and not to Pontius Pilate. This is where Judas's folly lies.

*In the play, repentance could be explained when the prosecution Attorney El-Fayoumy responds to Pilate.*

*El-Fayoumy ... Hege: Did you get the sense or impression that Judas was recanting out of genuine REMORSE and concern for Jesus, or, do you think he was seeking to undo the damage out of a neck-saving FEAR of the dire consequences and everlasting repercussions of betraying our rightful and most exalted and just Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the divine Son of Man?... (Guirgis, 2005).*

Other sub-themes that could be deduced from this play are **mercy** and **forgiveness**. **Mercy** means compassionate or kindly forbearance shown towards an offender, an enemy; and **forgiveness**

meaning a disposition or willingness to forgive. In the play, the sub-themes of mercy and forgiveness could be explained when Judas shows what he knows to Jesus in order to receive mercy and forgiveness”.

Judas: - *I tell you what I know: I watched you trip over your own dusty feet to heal the sick, the blind, the lame, the unclean - ...*

*You forgave Peter and bullshit Thomas – you knocked Paul of tarsus off a horse – you raised Lazarus from the fuckin’ dead – but me? Me? Your “heart”?! (Guirgis, 2005: p.12, 26, 72).*

Another more sub-theme is **existentialism**, which is a movement in philosophy and literature that emphasizes individual existence, freedom, and choice. Existentialists refuse to belong to any school of thought, repudiating the adequacy of any body of beliefs or systems, claiming them to be superficial, academic and remote from life. Moreover, it is a reaction against the traditional schools of philosophy, such as Rationalism, British Empiricism and positivism that seek to discover an ultimate order and universal meaning in metaphysical principles or in the structure of the observed world ([www.britannica.com/Topic/existentialism/definition](http://www.britannica.com/Topic/existentialism/definition), History, characteristics. Retrieved on 13 August, 2022).

Existentialism could also be explained when Mother Teresa tells how she experienced a terrible pain of loss, of God not wanting her, of God not being God, and of God not really existing (**Guirgis, 2005: 27**).

The sub-theme of **loyalty**, could also be promoted by the playwright just when he introduces Pilate responding to Cunningham as he was asked to justify the death sentence of Jesus Christ a Jew like him (Pilate) issued at Jewish people’s whim and fancy.

Pilate: *I did what I had to do to preserve the damn peace! Why? Cuz that my damn job! You wanna call me a liar? Question my veracity and my character?*

*I am a Roman... VERITAS! And that means TRUTH!*

*And that means my honor is defined by my integrity and my integrity is defined by my truth (Guirgis, 2005: 63).*

*In addition to that, El – Fayoumy responds to Caiaphas as far as Judas’ crossing the line is concerned:*

*“Caiaphas the Elder: I have no response to that*

*El – Fayoumy: As well you should!... It has been said that in Western culture the most prized virtue is honesty, but in Eastern culture, the most prized virtue was and is loyalty...*

*Caiaphas the Elder: but the most important requirement of the law is obedience to it. That is most prized (Guirgis, 2005: 49).*

The sub-theme of **disobedience** could be explained when El-Fayoumy and Caiaphas are conversing about Judas Iscariot’s case, the case of which Judas crossed the established lines as in:

*Judas betrayed the ideals, the law. He crossed the line coming from God. It is given. We do not create it. Which is why it should not be modified. It is only ours to obey or betray (Guirgis, 2005 p. 47, 48).*

The sub-themes of **hell** and **eternal death** could be explained by the fact that Judas Iscariot is sentenced to eternal damnation referring to the verdict reached by the trial jury.

**Butch Honeywell:** *um, uh, Mr. Iscariot? Uh, Mr. Iscariot, Uh, Mr.*

*Iscariot, I uh, I don’t know if you can hear me,*



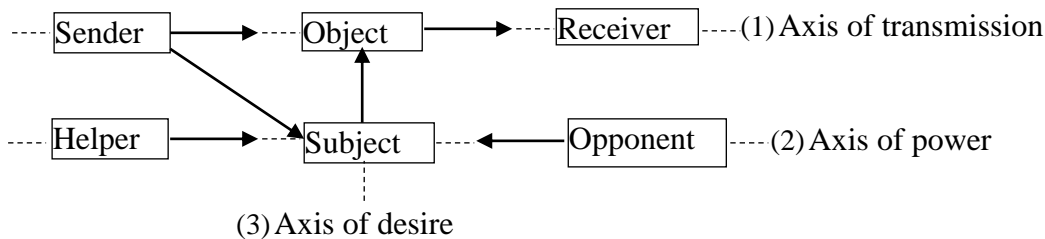
*But, I just wanted to introduce myself, if, if I  
 Could. I'm, uh, Butch Honeywell. I was the  
 Foreman of the jury at your trial there... and...  
 Well: We found you guilty, Mr. Iscariot...*

*I'm sorry about that... Oh, Uh... I brought You a twelve-pack of beer (Guirgis, 2005:74).*

The sub-theme of **exploitation of children** could be explained by the fact that Judas Iscariot, again at the age of eight, had been sent out fishing by his mother to get food for him and his poor starving sisters. Yet, nowadays children are not allowed to work by Human Rights.

#### 4. Greimas Actantial Narrative Schema

Greimas actantial narrative schema is a fundamentally narrative structure of a text. According to Greimas (Budiman, 2006:16), this schema has six roles or functions that are arranged in three binary oppositions, such as subject and object, sender and receiver, helper and opponent. And such a narrative structure can be presented as follows:



However, the arrows in the schema become the important units that connect syntactic narrative function in each actant.

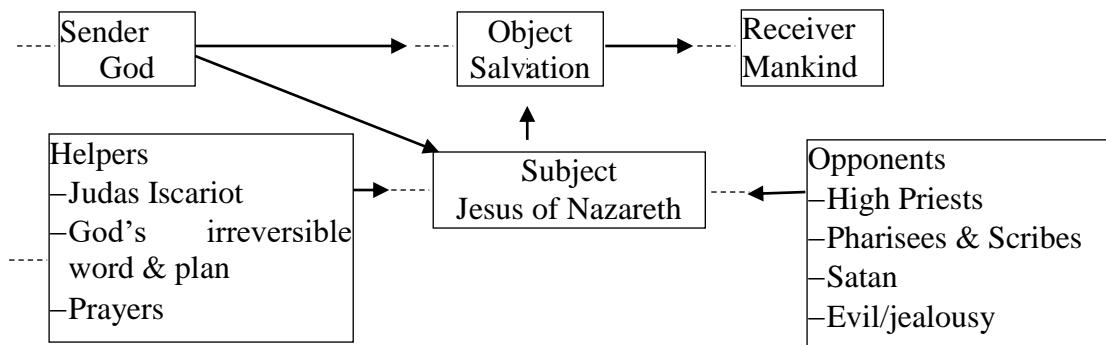
- Sender is someone or something that becomes the idea or has the function as driving force of the story. This sender creates a desire for the subject to get the object.
- Receiver is someone or something that receives the object result from the subject.
- Subject is someone or something that is assigned by the sender to get the desired object.
- Object is the thing that the subject needs or wants.
- Helper is someone or something helping or makes an easier the subject to get an object.
- Opponent is someone or something blocking the subject to get an object.

Moreover, the arrow on the sender that leads to the object implies that there is a desire of the sender to get the object. The arrow from the object to the receiver implies that something is sought on the subject given by the sender and wished by the receiver.

The arrow from the helper to the subject implies that the helper provides assistance to the subject in order to fulfill the tasks assigned by the sender. Then, the arrow of opponent interrupts, obstructs, opposes and undermines the business subject.

#### 4.1. The application of Greimas Actantial model to *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*

##### Actantial Narrative Schema



God (sender) told Jesus of Nazareth (subject) to come on earth in order to redeem or give salvation (object) to mankind (receiver). Because of jealousy or evil (opposing forces), the Jewish High Priests, the Pharisees, the Scribes, and Satan (opponents), all in one spirit resolved to prevent or oppose themselves to the realization of God's plan of salvation in meeting Judas Iscariot (helper) one of Jesus's disciples and apostles, and proposed him an amount of money so as to forward Jesus's project of redeeming humanity. All that, was in favor of the Sender (God), the Subject (Jesus of Nazareth), and the Receiver (Mankind). Moreover, God's irreversible word and plan, and prayers surely helped Jesus to resist and persist in order to achieve His primary goal on earth.

The false implicit contract in this game is that: if Judas Iscariot takes the money, then they will arrest and crucify Jesus of Nazareth and mankind would not get access or receive salvation that Jesus brought with Him. But the story turned into the way all the opposing forces could not imagine the most. That is, their opposition desperately turned into an accurate instrument for peoples' salvation, with Judas Iscariot being considered as Jesus of Nazareth's helper to purposefully fulfill his mission of saving mankind by being first arrested, and then crucified or sentenced to death out of a false trial by Pontius Pilate. That was because of Judas Iscariot's naivety and stupidity.

### 5. Devices of the plot

The 4 devices of the plot as discussed by Aristotle are found in this play namely, recognition, reversal of intention, dramatic irony, and poetic justice.

#### 5.1. Recognition

Recognition, is a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hatred between the persons destined by the poet for the good or bad fortune. And that, the best form of recognition is coincidence with a reversal of intention (Aristotle cited in Ngwaba, 2020). There is recognition because Judas finally realized that he did wrong and he acknowledged his mistake of selling an innocent person. This is recognition as Cunningham, the Defense Attorney responds to judge Littlefield.

Cunningham: Judas came to your office and begged you on bended knee to take the money and release Jesus, and you refused him! Judas recanted. He tried to return the money – first to the Sanhedrin and then to you. Do you deny that?

#### 5.2. Reversal of intention

In the play it's indicated that before the Last Supper, Judas is said to have gone to the Chief Priests and agreed to hand over Jesus in exchange for thirty silver coins. And later, after realizing that Jesus was an Innocent, Judas changes his mind and went to return the thirty silver coins to High Priest because of having sold an innocent person.

Judas changes his mind and says:

“Judas: I made a mistake, please, please, don-t you understand, man –

Pilate: I understand perfectly. You sold out your brother, now you feel guilty, so you trying' to come in here talking' bout, "It was dark, I kissed the wrong muthahfuckah", but we Romans, man – Romans don't dance that song.

Judas: I'm recanting –

Pilate: you can't recant! ... (Guirgis, 2005: 57).

### 5.3. *Dramatic Irony*

Dramatic irony is the kind of things that happen in a play such as when the audience is aware of something that one of the dramatic personae is not aware of, or does not know anything about it (Ngwaba, 2020: 21). There is dramatic irony in the play because, Judas didn't know that they would sentence Jesus to death. While the Chief Priests and the other know including Jesus Himself.

The playwright presents Jesus and Judas exchanging about the forgiveness of Judas Iscariot's sins.

Judas: you forgave Peter and bullshit Thomas – you knocked Paul of Tarsus off a horse – you raised Lazarus from the fuckin" dead – but me? Your "Heart"?! ... I made a mistake! And if that was wrong, then you should have told me! ...

Jesus: Don't you think... that if I knew that it would have changed your mind... that I would have? (Guirgis, 2005: 72).

### 5.4. *Poetic justice*

Poetic justice the proper distribution of rewards and punishment as it's the case in the play the "Judas", when the Jury reached a guilty Verdict or sentence and ordered it upon Judas Iscariot because of having crossed the line of betrayal of his Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth.

Poetic justice appears as a kind of revenge that is justified, an ideal justice with proper distribution of rewards and punishments. Judas is tried and sentenced to death is all poetic justice.

Jesus's arrest is also poetic justice. In the play Judas Iscariot's sentence is wade by Butch Honeywell as the playwright shows.

Butch Honeywell: um, uh, Mr. Iscariot?

Uh, Mr. Iscariot, I uh, I don't know if you can hear me, but, I just – I just wanted to introduce myself, if I could. I'm, uh, Butch Honeywell. I was the foreman of the jury at your trial there... and ... well: We found you guilty Mr. Iscariot... I'm really sorry about that... oh (Guirgis, 2005: 74).

## 6. *Artistry and Craft*

The play, *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, demonstrates certain artistry and craft through Guirgis's ability to create a satirical – tragi comic – existentialist – history play. Part of Guirgis's artistry resides in turning a Bible story into performing art, using his imagination to make Judas betrayal a court case, bringing in judges, witnesses, and psychology to examine his case more objectively. Where he, as a playwright, actor and struggling Catholic, explores Judas' relationship with Jesus while challenging traditional notions of Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, and Jesus's teaching.

Part of the craft is the way the story is told in a much more sensational, realistic and humorous.

The writer's artistry resides in the use of plot devices such as recognition, reversal of intention, dramatic irony and poetic justice that make the outcome of the story credible.

The antagonist's misfortune is presented in an acceptable way as being due to the crossing of the lines.



The play is interested in examining Judas' act from different perspectives such as love, justice, free will and forgiveness.

Guirgis' vernacular demonstrates craft that could seem anti-religious to some critics but he smartly covers conflicts between forgiveness, mercy and eternal damnation. The role of remorse plays heavily here. How free will and God's love collide in Judas' case makes for high drama.

The play captures and holds our fullest and most concentrated attention; it sharpens and refines our understanding of moral values and our insight into other people or our surroundings.

### **Conclusion**

As I started this piece of writing on Guirgis's play *The Last Days of Judas Iscariot*, I began with a number of myths that have set in the minds of religious analysts about Judas Iscariot's outcome concerning his betrayal of Jesus of Nazareth. For the religious analysts, Judas Iscariot must go to hell. This could only be their perception about Judas's fate. On the other hand, Judas Iscariot's case should be well questioned because his act was but a help vis-à-vis God's plan of salvation.

There is enough thorough investigation of the issue that indicate that the writer has intentionally and commutatively endeavored to approach the modernist added value expressed throughout the work. That is, old ideas and traditions are questioned, the New Testament is examined, old truths and certainties are questioned and new truths are sought after. Which is why the play takes us to a courtroom in purgatory to examine or question Judas Iscariot's case. Lawyers call witnesses to the stand to question and cross examine them in a search for understanding and knowledge.

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